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LES FLEURS DE FRANCE

VOL. I

CRISES

TALES OF MYSTERY AND HORROR

BY

MAURICE LEVEL

LES FLEURS DE FRANCE

Edited by Alys Eyre Macklin

Is a series of translations of outstanding works by celebrated French authors.

A new volume, uniform with this, will appear every two months.

VOL. 1.

CRISES

TALES OF MYSTERY AND HORROR

By Maurice Level

VOL. 2. (ready March 1st).

An Anthology consisting of 30 contes by 30 of the best-known French writers of to-day,

LES FLEURS DE FRANCE

CRISES

Tales of Mystery and Horror

By
MAURICE LEVEL

Translated from the French by
Alys Eyre Macklin
With an Introduction by
H. B. Irving



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INTRODUCTION

In allowing his stories to take an English form, M. Maurice Level is courting comparison with some very remarkable writers in his own peculiar line of country. It was Mr. Arnold Bennett who said there are as good short stories in the English language as in any other, and if he had gone on to say that there are as good stories of weirdness and horror in English as in any other language, he would not have been wide of the mark. Edgar Allen Poe, Sheridan Lefanu, Robert Louis Stevenson, George Eliot in "The Lifted Veil," Marion Crawford in "The Upper Berth," Henry James in "The Two Magics," and among living authors, Kipling, H. G. Wells, Conan Doyle, Quiller Couch, W. W. Jacobs, the Provost of Eton and Arthur Machen, all these have excelled in varying degrees in the kind of story which M. Level writes.

But M. Level can well afford to stand the test of comparison. Reminding one of Edgar Allen Poe more than any other, he employs the methods of O. Henry in the service of the horrible. M. Level has given literary expression of a high order to the compact horrors of the Grand Guignol. There is undoubted originality in his treatment of that kind of gruesomeness which fascinated the imagination of Poe. But his stories are more

INTRODUCTION

real than these of Poe, terser, more concentrated in their horror; they bear a closer relation to life; and in certain of them there is a genuine pathos of which Poe was incapable. This last quality finds best expression in such of his stories as the "Beggar" and "Extenuating Circumstances." It would be idle to pretend that M. Level's stories are all of equal merit; in so prolific a writer it would be impossible they should be. But to the reader who likes this sort of thing, they offer something new in the way of tasting horrors. Jaded as his palate may be, he will get unaccustomed thrills out of M. Level. He can sit in his armchair and enjoy some of the horrors of the Grand Guignol without risking the frequent ineffectiveness of the horrible when it is put crudely on the stage.

M. Level is himself a gay, light-hearted man, essentially Parisian in temperament. He is no morbid student, no irredeemable pessimist, whose natural melancholy colours his whole life and imagination. He is a daring sportsman, fond of all out-door sports, leading a simple life, an ardent patriot who has proved his patriotism in the field. When asked on one occasion to explain the difference between the sombre character of his work and his apparent light-heartedness, he said that writers of sad things are usually gay in real life, while professional humourists are frequently melancholy. His sad stories, he said, were mostly written in youth, which by a law of contrast seems inclined to dwell on the sad side of things.

INTRODUCTION

M. Level is about forty years of age. His first story was written during a night-watch in a hospital in which he was house-surgeon. He took it to José-Maria de Heredia, the Academician, then literary editor of "Le Journal," who accepted it for publication, and was a warm friend of the author till his death a few years ago. M. Level's father was an Alsatian. From him he inherited an intense love of France and hatred of Germany; indeed, to the latter influence he traces his early sense of tragedy in life. His father was an officer in the army, and much of his youth was spent in Algiers. He came to Paris to study medicine, and in the course of that study acquired the knowledge of and sympathy with real suffering which gives to some of the most tragic of his tales a true human touch. An accident he met with while skating in Switzerland in 1910 made very active work impossible. "Depuis, hélas! je pêche à la ligne," was his own description of his apparent future. But in 1914 he left a sanatorium in Switzerland where he was resting and joined the 2nd Tirailleurs Marocains. He fought with them till his health gave way, and then acted as military surgeon in a base hospital.

I trust I have said enough to commend to English readers the work of one who, as artist and man, may justly claim their interest and admiration.

H. B. IRVING.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

In his scholarly little Preface Mr. H. B. Irving has said all that is necessary to introduce Maurice Level, the writer of the original French of these stories, to English readers, but I feel that I should like to explain why I sat down during a war that overwhelmed us all with misery to translate work that is only too well described as "Tales of Mystery and Horror." It was certainly not because, as a smiling friend suggested, I imagined I was thereby adding to the gaiety of nations. I hope and believe I am adding something better than that.

Voilà. It is some years since I first came across Maurice Level's work in "Le Journal," the French newspaper that is famed for its daily short story which is almost always contributed by one or other of the most celebrated writers in France. The story that attracted my attention was one that is translated here under the title "Blue Eyes." For me there was nothing "shocking" in the theme. France is one of those happy countries where people accept knowledge of the facts of life as simply as they accept the state of the weather; and in its salons you may discuss subjects we others still feel it polite to ignore as impersonally as you would the rising of the Seine or the fall in the price of coal. What struck me was the sympathy and understanding that underlay the telling of the

episode. Not a word of excuse or explanation or moralising: just a simple statement of a dramatic happening—en passant, you want to know the superstitious horror the submerged classes have of the guillotine to realize how dramatic the *dénouement* is—that revealed, apparently unconsciously, a devoted love, heroic effort to keep a promise, and a complete abnegation of self that raise an apparently lost soul to a height it is not given us all to attain. This was all the more striking because between the lines you divine the details of the sad little life-story, that of a child, pretty and delicate, who was either brought up in or had sunk into the depths of the underworld where she fell into the hands of a *souteneur* who represented all she knew of Romance and Love, the ghastly existence that led to forgetting the words of prayer that rise mechanically to all lips in Catholic countries when the cemeteries are visited on the day that is annually given up to the memory of the dead, the moral insensibility that underlay her way of getting the flowers for the grave of the dead lover. Never had I read anything that so well showed the truth of “*Tout comprendre, c’est tout pardonner.*”

I began to look out for further stories by the same author, and found that, whatever the subject, there was always the same profound understanding and sympathy. What could be more pity-compelling, for instance, than the life-history of the unfortunate hero of “*The Beggar*”? It is again between the

lives that you learn of an abandoned child picked up out of charity, pre-destined by circumstances and limited brain-power to know nothing of life but its miseries, yet who retained a simple, kindly nature dulled by misfortune, his greatest grief being that children were always afraid of and ran away from him, and who only revolts when a selfless attempt to do a kind action for a chance acquaintance leads to his being treated as if he were of less account than a dog—"never before had he felt so despised and rejected." "Illusion" is another story of the same kind, and there are scores of similar examples among the seven hundred contes M. Level has written.

It goes without saying that I was also influenced by the supreme art that can in two thousand words give a clear and definite impression not only of the character of people who in many of the stories do not even have names given to them, but frequently of their heredity and other influences that amount to predestination. But that was not the important point, and in any case the literary merit must be left to the judgment of the reader.

Another human attribute that struck me immensely as I read was the writer's complete understanding of the sick as well as of the mentally deficient brain. The terrible happenings in "The Taint," "A Maniac," "A Mistake," the titanic, Greek-drama-like revenge in "The Last Kiss," etc., are all natural and logical if you consider the effect the circumstances that led to the crises would have on exasperated nerves and over-strained brains,

the latter probably never well-balanced. One would be inclined to regret the brain-specialist who was lost when Maurice Level gave up his medical career for literature were it not that he has probably been more useful in another direction. For I feel I cannot be alone in thinking that stories that show so clearly how very fine the line is between sanity and brain-sickness, how completely at the mercy of circumstances many of us are, that the moral insensibility that leads to so many manifestations of criminal tendencies is a disease and must be accepted and dealt with as a kind of awful predestination, must lead to a better understanding of various social evils, to a sort of "But for the grace of God there goes John Bradford" attitude towards many we might otherwise shrink from and leave unaided.

Not that Maurice Level ever thought of that: he will probably be amazed when he reads what I say. He wrote because he could not help it, for—to use a much-abused expression—Art for Art's sake, and his subjects came unbidden, thrust on him by the obscure instinct that guides the born writer. But the value of his work from the Human Document point of view remains the same, and must have for many the special appeal it had for Mr. Irving, whose books, "Studies of Criminals of the Nineteenth Century, and "A book of Remarkable Criminals," prove how profound his own studies in criminology and the psychology of criminals have been.

ALYS EYRE MACKLIN.

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CRISES

I

THE DEBT COLLECTOR

Ravenot, debt collector to the same bank for ten years, was a model employé. Never had there been the least cause to find fault with him. Never had the slightest error been detected in his books.

Living alone, carefully avoiding new acquaintances, keeping out of cafés and without love-affairs, he seemed happy, quite content with his lot. If it were sometimes said in his hearing: "It must be temptation to handle such large sums!" he would quietly reply: "Why? Money that doesn't belong to you is not money."

In the locality in which he lived he was looked upon as a paragon, his advice sought after and taken.

•

On the evening of one collecting-day he did not return to his home. The idea of dishonesty never even suggested itself to those who knew him. Possibly a crime had been committed. The police traced his movement during the day. He had

presented his bills punctually, and had collected his last sum near the Montrouge Gate about seven o'clock, when he had over two hundred thousand francs in his possession. Further than that all trace of him was lost. They scoured the waste ground that lies near the fortifications; the hovels that are found here and there in the military zone were ransacked: all with no result. As a matter of form they telegraphed in every direction, to every frontier station. But the directors of the bank, as well as the police, had little doubt that he had been laid in wait for, robbed, and thrown into the river. Basing their deductions on certain clues, they were able to state almost positively that the coup had been planned for some time by professional thieves.

Only one man in Paris shrugged his shoulders when he read about it in the papers: that man was Ravenot.

Just at the time when the keenest sleuth-hounds of the police were losing his scent, he had reached the Seine by the Boulevards Exterieurs. He had dressed himself under the arch of a bridge in some everyday clothes he had left there the night before had put the two hundred thousand francs in his pocket, and, making a bundle of his uniform and satchel, he had weighted it with a large stone and dropped it into the river; then, unperturbed, he had returned to Paris. He slept at an hotel, and

slept well. In a few hours he had become a consummate thief.

Profiting by his start, he might have taken a train across the frontier. He was too wise to suppose that a few hundred kilometres would put him beyond the reach of the gendarmes, and he had no illusions as to the fate that awaited him. He would most assuredly be arrested. Besides, his plan was a very different one.

When daylight came, he enclosed the two hundred thousand francs in an envelope, sealed it with five seals, and went to a lawyer.

"Monsieur," said he, "this is why I have come to you. In this envelope I have some securities, papers that I want to leave in safety. I am going for a long journey, and I don't know when I shall return. I should like to leave this packet with you. I suppose you have no objection to my doing so?"

"None whatever. I'll give you a receipt."

He assented, then began to think. A receipt? Where could he put it? To whom entrust it? If he kept it on his person, he would certainly lose his deposit. He hesitated, not having foreseen this complication. Then he said easily:

"I am alone in the world, without relations and friends. The journey I intend making is not without danger. I should run the risk of losing the receipt, or it might be destroyed. Would it

not be possible for you to take possession of the packet and place it in safety among your documents, and when I return, I should merely have to tell you, or your successor, my name?"

"But if I do that——"

"State on the receipt that it can only be claimed in this way. At any rate, if there is any risk, it is mine."

"Agreed! What is your name?"

He replied without hesitation:

"Duverger, Henri Duverger."

When he got back to the street he breathed a sigh of relief. The first part of his programme was over. They could clap the handcuffs on him now: the substance of his theft was beyond reach.

He had worked things out with cold deliberation on these lines: on the expiration of his sentence he would claim the deposit. No one would be able to dispute his right to it. Four or five unpleasant years to be gone through, and he would be a rich man. It was preferable to spending his life trudging from door to door collecting debts. He would go to live in the country. To everyone he would be "Monsieur Duverger." He would grow old in peace and contentment, known as an honest, charitable man—for he would spend some of the money on others.

He waited twenty-four hours longer to make sure the numbers of the notes were not known,

and reassured on this point, he gave himself up, a cigarette between his lips.

Another man in his place would have invented some story. He preferred to tell the truth, to admit the theft. Why waste time? But at his trial, as when he was first charged, it was impossible to drag from him a word about what he had done with the 200,000 francs. He confined himself to saying :

"I don't know. I fell asleep on a bench . . . In my turn I was robbed."

Thanks to his irreproachable past he was condemned to only five years' penal servitude. He heard the sentence without moving a muscle. He was thirty-five. At forty, he would be free and rich. He considered the confinement a small, necessary sacrifice.

In the prison where he served his sentence he was a model for all the others, just as he had been a model employé. He watched the slow days pass without impatience or anxiety, concerned only about his health.

At last the day of his discharge came. They gave him back his little stock of personal effects, and he left with but one idea in his mind, that of getting to the lawyer. As he walked along, he imagined the coming scene.

He would arrive. He would be ushered into the impressive office. Would the lawyer recognise

him? He would look in the glass: decidedly he had grown considerably older, and no doubt his face bore traces of his experience. No, certainly the lawyer would not recognise him. Ha! Ha! It would add to the humour of the situation.

“What can I do for you, Monsieur?”

“I have come for a deposit I made here five years ago.”

“Which deposit? In what name?”

“In the name of Monsieur——”

Ravenot stopped, suddenly murmuring:

“How extraordinary. I can’t remember the name I gave.”

He racked his brains—a blank! He sat down on a bench, and feeling that he was growing unnerved, reasoned with himself.

“Come, come! Be calm! Monsieur—Monsieur——. It began with—which letter?”

For an hour he sat lost in thought, straining his memory, groping after something that might suggest a clue. A waste of time. The name danced in front of him, round about him: he saw the letters jump, the syllables vanish. Every second he felt that he had it, that it was before his eyes, on his lips. No! At first this only worried him: then it became a sharp irritation that cut into him with a pain that was almost physical. Hot waves ran up and down his back. His muscles contracted: he found it impossible to

sit still. His hands began to twitch. He bit his dry lips. He was divided between an impulse to weep and one to fight. But the more he focussed his attention, the further the name seemed to recede. He struck the ground with his foot, rose, and said aloud :

“What’s the good of worrying? It only makes things worse. If I leave off thinking about it, it will come of itself.”

But an obsession cannot be shaken off in this way. In vain he turned his attention to the faces of the passers-by, stopped at the shop-windows, listened to the street noises : while he listened, unhearing, and looked, unseeing, the great question persisted :

“Monsieur? Monsieur?”

Night came. The streets were deserted. Worn out, he went to an hotel, asked for a room, and flung himself fully dressed on the bed. For hours he went on racking his brain. At dawn he fell asleep. It was broad daylight when he awoke. He stretched himself luxuriously, his mind at ease ; but in a flash the obsession gripped him again :

“Monsieur? Monsieur?”

A new sensation began to dominate his anguish of mind : fear. Fear that he might never remember the name, never. He got up, went out, walked for hours at random, hanging round the

office of the lawyer. For the second time, night fell. He clutched his head in his hand and groaned :

“ I shall go mad.”

A terrible idea had now taken possession of his mind ; he had 200,000 francs in notes, 200,000 francs, acquired by dishonesty, of course, but his, and they were out of his reach. To get them he had undergone five years in prison, and now he could not touch them. The notes were there waiting for him, and one word, a mere word he could not remember, stood, an insuperable barrier, between him and them. He beat with clenched fists on his head, feeling his reason trembling in the balance ; he stumbled against lamp-posts with the sway of a drunken man, tripped over kerbstones. It was no longer an obsession or a torment. It had become a frenzy of his whole being, of his brain and of his flesh. He had now become convinced that he would never remember. His imagination conjured up a sardonic laugh that rang in his ears ; people in the streets seemed to point at him as he passed. His steps quickened into a run that carried him straight ahead, knocking up against the passers-by, oblivious of the traffic. He wished to strike back, to be run over, crushed out of existence.

“ Monsieur ? Monsieur ? ”

At his feet the Seine flowed by, a muddy green

spangled with the reflections of the bright stars. He sobbed out :

“Monsieur——? Oh, that name! That name!”

He went down the steps that lead to the river, and lying face downwards, worked himself towards it to cool his face and hands. He was panting; the water drew him...drew his hot eyes...his ears... his whole body. He felt himself slipping, and unable to cling to the steep bank, he fell. The shock of the cold water set every nerve a-tingle. He struggled...thrust out his arms... flung his head up...went under...rose to the surface again, and with a sudden mighty effort, his eyes staring from his head, he yelled :

“I’ve got it!...Help! Duverger! Du——”

The quay was deserted. The water rippled against the pillars of the bridge: the echo of the sombre arch repeated the name in the silence...The river rose and fell lazily: lights danced on it, white and red. A wave a little stronger than the rest licked the bank near the mooring rings...All was still...

II

THE KENNEL

As ten o'clock struck, M. de Hartevel emptied a last tankard of beer, folded his newspaper, stretched himself, yawned, and slowly rose.

The hanging lamp cast a bright light on the table-cloth over which were scattered piles of shot and cartridge wads. Near the fireplace, in the shadow, a woman lay back in a deep arm-chair.

Outside, the wind blew violently against the windows, the rain beat noisily on the glass, and from time to time, deep bayings came from the kennel where the hounds had struggled and strained since morning.

There were forty of them, big mastiffs with ugly fangs, stiff-haired griffons of Vendée, powerful beasts that flung themselves with ferocity on the wild boar on hunting-days. During the night their sullen bayings disturbed the whole country-side, evoking response from all the dogs in the neighbourhood.

M. de Hartevel lifted a curtain and looked out into the darkness of the park. The wet branches shone like steel blades; the autumn leaves were

blown about like whirligigs and flattened against the walls. He grumbled :

"Dirty weather!"

He walked a few steps, his hands in his pockets, stopped before the fireplace and with a kick broke a half-consumed log. Red embers fell on the ashes; a flame rose, straight and pointed.

Madame de Hartevel did not move. The light of the fire played on her face, touching her hair with gold, throwing a rosy glow on her pale cheeks and, dancing about her, cast fugitive shadows on her forehead, her eyelids, her lips.

The hounds, quiet for a moment, began to growl again: and their bayings, the roaring of the wind and the hiss of the rain on the trees, made the quiet room seem warmer, the presence of the woman more intimate.

Subconsciously this influenced M. de Hartevel. Desires stimulated by those of the beasts and by the warmth of the room crept through his veins. He touched his wife's shoulder.

"It is ten o'clock. Are you going to bed?"

She said *"yes,"* and left her chair, as if regretfully.

He hesitated, his heels against the fender, and without looking at her, asked in a low voice :

"Would you like me to come with you?"

"No . . . thank you . . ."

Frowning, he bowed :

“As you like.”

His shoulders against the mantelshelf, his legs apart, he watched her go. She walked with a graceful, undulating movement, the train of her dress moving on the carpet like a little flat wave. A surge of anger stiffened his muscles.

In this château where he had her all to himself, he had in bygone days imagined a wife who would like living in seclusion with him, attentive to his wishes, smiling acquiescence to all his desires. She would welcome him with gay words when he came back from a day's hunting, his hands blue with cold, his strong body tired, bringing with him the freshness of the fields and moors, the smell of horses, of game and of hounds, would lift eager lips to meet his own. Then, after the long ride in the wind, the rain, the snow, after the intoxication of the crisp air, the heavy walking in the furrows, or the gallop under branches that almost caught his beard, there would have been long nights of love, orgies of caresses of which the thrill would have been mutual.

The difference between the dream and the reality!

When the door had shut, and the sound of steps died away in the corridor, he went to his room, lay down, took a book and tried to read.

The rain hissed louder than ever. The wind roared in the chimney; out in the park, branches

were snapping from the trees; the hounds bayed without ceasing, their howlings sounding through the creaking of the trees, dominating the roar of the storm; the door of the kennel strained under their weight.

He opened the window and shouted:

“Down!”

For some seconds they were quiet. He waited. The wind that drove the rain on his face refreshed him. The barkings began again. He banged his fist against the shutter, threatening:

“Quiet, you devils!”

There was a singing in his ears, a whistling, a ringing: a desire to strike, to ransack, to feel flesh quiver under his fists took possession of him. He roared: “Wait a moment!” slammed the window, seized a whip, and went out.

He strode along the corridors with no thought of the sleeping house till he got near his wife’s room, when he walked slowly and quietly, fearing to disturb her sleep. But a ray of light from under her door caught his lowered eyes, and there was a sound of hurried footsteps that the carpet did not deaden. He listened . . . The noise ceased, the light went out . . . He stood motionless, and suddenly, impelled by a suspicion, he called softly:

“Marie Therèse . . .”

No reply. He called louder. Curiosity,

doubt that he dared not formulate, held him breathless. He gave two sharp little taps on the door: a voice inside asked;

"Who is there?"

"I . . . Open the door . . ."

A whiff of warm air laden with various perfumes and a suspicion of ether passed over his face.

The voice asked:

"What is it?"

He walked in without replying. He felt his wife standing close in front of him: her breath was on him, the lace of her dress touched his chest. He felt in his pocket for matches. Not finding any, he ordered:

"Light the lamp!"

She obeyed, and as his eyes ran over the room he saw the curtains drawn closely, a shawl on the carpet, the open bed, white and very large; and in a corner, near the fireplace, a man lying across a long rest-chair, his collar unfastened, his head dropping, his arms hanging loosely, his eyes shut.

He gripped his wife's wrist: . . .

"Ah, you—filth! . . . Then this is why you turn your back on me!" : . .

She did not shrink from him, did not move. No shadow of fear passed over her pallid face. She only raised her head, murmuring:

"You are hurting me . . ."

He let her go, and bending over the inert body, his fist raised, cried :

“ A lover in my wife’s bedroom ! .
And . . . what a lover ! A friend—almost a son—Whore ! ”

She interrupted him :

“ He is not my lover . . . ”

He burst into a laugh :

“ Ah ! Ah ! You expect me to believe that ! ”

He seized the collar of the recumbent man and lifted him up towards him. But when he saw the livid face, the half-opened mouth showing the teeth and gums, when he felt the strange chill of the flesh that touched his hands, he started and let go. The body fell back heavily on the cushions, the forehead beating twice against a chair. His fury turned upon his wife.

“ What have you to say ? . . . Explain. ”

“ It is very simple,” she said. “ I was just going to bed when I heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor . . . uncertain steps . . . faltering, and a voice begging, ‘ Open the door. . . open the door. . . ’ I thought you might be ill. I opened the door. Then he came, or rather, fell into the room. . . I knew he was subject to heart attacks. . . I laid him there. . . I was just going to bring you when you knocked . . . that’s all. . . ”

Bending over the body, and apparently quite

calm again, he asked, every word pronounced distinctly :

"And it does not surprise you that no one heard him come in? . . ."

"The hounds bayed. . ."

"*And why should he come here at this hour of the night ?*"

She made a vague gesture :

"It does seem strange . . . But . . . I can only suppose that he felt ill and that . . . quite alone in his own house . . . he was afraid to stay there . . . came here to beg for help . . . In any case, when he is better . . . as soon as he is able to speak . . . he will be able to explain . . ."

M. de Hartevel drew himself up to his full height and looked into his wife's eyes :

"It appears we shall have to accept your supposition, and that we shall never know exactly what underlies his being here to-night . . . He is dead."

She held out her hands and stammered, her teeth chattering :

"It's not possible. . . He is. . ."

"Yes. . . dead. . ."

He seemed to be lost in thought for a moment, then went on in an easier voice :

"After all, the more I think of it, the more natural it seems. Both his father and his uncle died like this, suddenly . . . Heart-disease is

hereditary in his family . . . A shock . . . a violent emotion . . . too keen a sensation . . . a great joy . . . We are weak creatures at best. . .”

He drew an arm-chair to the fire, sat down, and *his hands stretched out to the flames, continued:*

“But however simple and natural the event in itself may be, nothing can alter the fact that a man has died in your bed-room during the night. . . Is that not so? . . .”

She hid her face in her hands and made no reply.

“And if your explanation satisfies me, I am not able to make others accept it. The servants will have their own ideas, will talk . . . That will be dishonour for you, for me, for my family. . . That is not possible . . . We must find a way out of it . . . and I have already found it . . . With the exception of you and me, no one knows, no one will ever know what has happened in this room . . . No one saw him come in . . . Take the lamp and come with me . . .”

He seized the body in his arms and ordered:

“Walk on first . . .”

She hesitated as they went out of the door:

“What are you going to do? . . .”

“Leave it to me . . . Go on . . .”

Slowly and very quietly they went towards the staircase, she holding high the lamp, its light

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flickering on the walls, he carefully placing his feet on stair after stair. When they got to the door that led to the garden, he said :

“Open it without a sound.”

A gust of wind made the light flare up. Beaten on by the rain, the glass burst and fell in pieces on the threshold. She placed the extinguished lamp on the soil. They went into the park. The gravel crunched under their steps, and the rain beat upon them. He asked :

“Can you see the walk? . . . Yes? . . . Then come close to me . . . hold the legs . . . the body is heavy . . .”

They went forward in silence. M. de Hartevel stopped near a low door, saying :

“Feel in my right hand pocket . . . There’s a key there . . . That’s it . . . Give it to me . . . Now let the legs go . . . It’s as dark as a grave. . . Feel about till you find the key-hole. . . Have you got it? . . . Turn. . .”

Excited by the noise, the hounds began to bay. Madame de Hartevel started back.

“You are frightened? . . . Nonsense . . . Another turn . . . That’s it . . . Stand out of the way . . .”

With a thrust from his knee, he pushed open the door. Believing themselves free, the hounds bounded against his legs. Pushing them back with a kick, suddenly, with one great effort, he raised

the body above his head, balanced it there a moment, flung it into the kennel, and shut the door violently behind him.

Baying at full voice, the beasts fell on their prey. A frightful death-rattle: "Help!" pierced their clamour, a terrible cry, inhuman. It was followed by violent growlings.

An unspeakable horror took possession of Madame de Hartevel: a quick flash of understanding dominated her fear, and, her eyes wild, she flung herself on her husband, digging her nails in his face as she shrieked:

"Fiend! . . . He wasn't dead! . . ."

M. de Hartevel pushed her off with the back of his hand, and standing straight up before her jeered:

"Did you think he was!"

III

. WHO? . . .

That day I had worked very late, so late that when at length I raised my eyes from my desk, I found twilight had invaded my study. For some minutes I sat perfectly still, my brain in the dull condition that follows a big mental effort, and looked round mechanically. Everything was grey and formless in the half-light except where reflections from the last rays of the setting sun made little patches of brightness on table or mirror or picture. One must have fallen with particular strength on a skull placed on the top of a bookcase, for looking up, I saw it clearly enough to distinguish every detail from the point of the cheek-bones to the brutal angle of the jaw. As everything else became swallowed up in the fast-deepening shadow, it seemed to me that slowly but surely this head quickened into life and became covered with flesh; lips came down over the teeth, eyes filled the orbits, and soon, by some strange illusion, I had before me, as if suspended in the darkness, a face that was looking at me.

It was watching me fixedly, the mouth set in a

mocking smile. It was not one of those vague floating images one sees in hallucinations: this face appeared so real that for a second I was tempted to stretch out my hand to touch it. But immediately the cheeks dissolved, the orbits emptied, a slight mist enveloped it . . . and I saw nothing but a skull like all other skulls.

I lit my lamp and went on with my writing. Twice or thrice I raised my eyes to the place where I had seen the apparition, then the momentary excitement it had caused died away, and my head bent over my desk, I forgot all about it.

Now, a few days later, as I was going out of my house, I passed a young man who drew aside to allow me to cross the road. I bowed. He did the same and went on. But the face was familiar, and believing it was someone I knew, I turned to look after him, imagining he might have stopped. He had not, but I stood watching him till he disappeared among the passers-by. "A mistake on my part," I thought, but to my surprise I kept on asking myself: "Where the devil have I seen him?" . . . In a drawing-room? . . . At the hospital? . . . In my consulting-room? . . . No . . . I concluded that he must resemble someone else, and dismissed him from my thoughts. Or tried to—for in spite of myself, I continued to endeavour to place him. I certainly knew the head well: its deeply-set eyes, hard,

steady gaze, clean-shaven lip, straight mouth and square jaw made it too characteristic to be either forgotten or mistaken for that of another person. Where on earth had I seen it? During the whole evening it obsessed me, coming between me and what I was looking at, giving me the feeling of irritation caused by not being able to remember a name or some melody that haunts you. And this persisted for a long time, for weeks.

One day I saw my Unknown again in the street. As I approached, I almost stared at him. He, too, looked at me, looked at me with the same cold expression, WITH THE COLD LOOK I KNEW SO WELL, but he betrayed no sign of knowing me, did not hesitate a second, and avoided me by turning sharply to the right. My conclusion was the inevitable one. If I really knew him, he must also know me, and meeting me face to face for the second time, would have shown it by a glance or movement as if to stop. There had been nothing of this: I was therefore the victim of an illusion.

And I forgot all about him.

Some time after this, late one afternoon, a man was shown into my consulting room. He was hardly over the threshold when, much surprised, I rose to greet him: it was my Unknown. And once again the likeness that had obsessed me was so striking that, mechanically, I walked towards him with outstretched hand as to an acquaintance.

He showed surprise, and I almost stammered as I pointed to a chair, saying:

"Excuse me, but you are so extraordinarily like . . ."

Under his cold, intent gaze, I left my sentence unfinished, saying instead:

"What can I do for you?"

Sitting quietly with his two hands stretched on the arms of his chair, he did not reply immediately. I was beginning once more to cudgel my brains: "Where have I seen him?" when suddenly a thought, or rather an extraordinary vision, flashed into my mind, a vision amazing enough almost to surprise me into crying aloud: "I know!" At last I had succeeded in locating him—I had recognized on the shoulders of this living man the head that had appeared to me one evening in the darkness above my bookcase! It was not a resemblance: it was identically the same face. The coincidence was sufficiently curious to distract my attention from what he was saying, and he had been talking for some moments before I began to follow his case.

. . . "I don't think I was ever normal. When I was quite young I began to feel different from other boys, to have sudden desires to rush away, to hide myself, to be alone; while at other times I longed passionately for society, for wild excite-

CRISES

ments that would make me forget myself. Sometimes, for little or no reason, I had sudden fits of temper that almost choked me . . . They sent me to the sea, to the mountains; nothing did me any good. At the present time, I start at the slightest sound: a very bright light hurts me like a pain: and though all my organs are sound—I have been to several doctors—the whole of my body aches. Even if I sleep, I wake in the morning as tired as if I had been dissipating all night. Frequently a feeling of agony of mind for which there is no real cause makes my brain giddy: I can't sleep, or if I do, I have horrible nightmares . . .”

“Do you drink?”

“I have a horror of wine, of every kind of alcohol; I drink nothing but water. But I haven't yet told you the worst . . . what it is that is really grave in my condition . . . If anyone contradicts me even about a trifle, for a look, a gesture, a nothing, a sort of fury takes possession of me. I am careful never to carry any weapon in case I might be unable to resist using it. It seems to me that at these times my own will leaves me, as if that of someone else takes its place: it drives me on, I cease to be my own master, and when I come back to myself, I can't remember anything—except that I wanted to murder someone! If one of these crises takes me,

when I am at home, I can shut myself up safely in my own room, but if, as sometimes happens, I am out, I know nothing more till I find myself perhaps sitting on a bench alone at night in some strange place. Then, remembering the fury I felt and coupling it with the lassitude that has followed and the impossibility of recollecting what I have done, I begin to wonder if I have committed some crime. I rush home and shut myself up: my heart beats violently whenever the bell rings, and I have no peace of mind till some days have gone by and I feel sure that once again I have been saved from myself. You will understand, Doctor, that this state of things can't go on. I shall lose not only my health, but my reason . . . What am I to do?"

"There's nothing to be really alarmed about," I replied. "These are only the symptoms of a nervous condition that will yield to treatment. Let us try to find its cause. Do you work very hard? . . . No . . . Is there anything in your life that is likely to cause great nerve-strain? . . . No—Any excesses? . . . None . . . You can tell a doctor anything . . ."

His tone was convincing as he replied:

"I have told you the truth."

"Let us look for other reasons. Have you any brothers or sisters? . . . No . . . Your mother is alive? . . . Yes . . . She is probably very

highly-strung? . . . Not at all . . . And your father? . . . Is he strong, too?"

In a very low voice he replied :

"My father is dead."

"He died young?"

"Yes, I was just two years old."

"Do you know what he died of?"

This question seemed to affect him deeply, for he grew very pale. At this moment, more than at any other, I was struck by the extraordinary resemblance between him and the apparition. After a pause, he replied :

"Yes . . . and that is why my condition terrifies me. I know what my father died of; my father was guillotined."

Ah, how I regretted having pushed my investigations so far; I tried to glide off to something else; but we now understood each other. Endeavouring to speak naturally and hopefully, I gave him some general advice and some kind of prescription, then I told him that he must have confidence in himself, and be sure and come back to me soon. After I had gone to the door with him, I said to my servant :

"I will not see anyone else to-day."

I was not in a state to listen to or examine a sick person. My mind was confused : the apparition . . . the resemblance . . . this confession . . . I sat down and tried to collect my

thoughts, and soon I found that, in spite of myself, my eyes kept fixing themselves on the skull. I looked in vain for the strange resemblance that had for so long puzzled me—I saw nothing but its mysterious mask. But I was unable to keep my gaze from it: the head drew me, held me . . . I ended by leaving my chair and going to lift it down.

Then it was that, raising it in my hands, I became aware of an extraordinary thing that had till now escaped my notice. The lower part of the back of the head was marked by a broad and sharp groove, an unmistakable gash such as would be made by the violent stroke of an axe, such as is made on the necks of those who are executed by the instinctive retreat of the body, at the supreme moment, from the knife of the guillotine.

It may have been nothing but coincidence. Perhaps it could be explained by saying that I had already seen, without noticing, my consultant in the street, and that the face thus subconsciously registered in my memory had come before me when I was looking at the skull the night of the apparition . . . Perhaps . . . perhaps? . . . But there are mysteries, you know, that it is wiser not to try to solve.

IV

ILLUSION . . .

Blue with cold, clutching at the bottom of his pockets the few pence he had earned that morning by opening and shutting the doors of cabs, his head bent towards his shoulder in an attempt to get some shelter from the biting wind, the beggar moved among the hurrying crowd, too weary to accost, too benumbed to risk holding out a bare hand.

Blown sideways in powdery flakes, the snow caught in his beard, or melted on his neck. He did not notice it, for he was lost in a dream :

“ If I were rich, just for an hour . . . I’d have a carriage . . . ”

He stopped, thought for a moment, shook his head, and asked himself :

“ And what else ? . . . ”

Visions of various kinds of luxury passed through his mind. But every time he formulated a wish, he shrugged his shoulders.

“ No, that’s not it . . . Is it then so difficult to get just one minute of real happiness . . . ”
Trudging along in this way he saw another

beggar who was shivering under the projecting doorway of a house, his features drawn, his hand outstretched, his voice so weak it was lost in the noises of the street as he droned :

“Help, if you please . . . Please help me . . .”

Close by him sat a dog, a poor bedraggled cur that trembled as it barked feebly, trying to wag its tail. He stopped. Before this other brother in affliction the dog yelped a little louder, rubbing its nose against him.

He looked with attention at the beggar, at his rags, his gaping shoes, his poor hands blue with cold, at the set, livid face with closed eyes, at the grey placard on his breast which bore the one word : “Blind.”

Feeling that a man had stopped before him, the blind man took up his plaintive cry :

“Help, Monsieur . . . Pity the poor blind . . .”

The beggar stood motionless. The passers-by quickened their steps, turning their heads away. A woman loaded with furs, followed by a servant in livery who held an umbrella over her, came out of the big door-way, and walking quickly on the tips of her toes as she protected her mouth with her muff, was swallowed up in her carriage.

The blind man kept on murmuring his monotonous appeal :

“Help . . . Please spare me a copper . . .”

But no one paid any attention to him. **After**

a time the beggar took some coppers from his pocket and held them out. The dog saw the action and barked with pleasure. The blind man closed his trembling fingers on the halfpence and said :

"Thank you, Monsieur . . . may God reward you . . ."

Hearing himself addressed as "Monsieur," the beggar was on the point of replying :

"I'm not Monsieur, mate. I'm just another poor devil as miserable as yourself . . ."

But he restrained himself, and knowing only too well how the poor are spoken to, answered :

"It is very little, my poor fellow . . ."

"You are very kind, Monsieur . . . it is so cold, and you must have taken your hands out of your pockets for me. It is bad weather for the infirm . . . If people only knew . . ."

A great pity welled up in the heart of the beggar as he muttered :

"I know . . . I know . . ."

Then, forgetting his own poverty in the face of this greater affliction, he asked :

"Were you born blind?"

"No . . . it came as I grew old . . . At the hospital they told me that it was caused by age . . . cataract, they called it, I think . . . But I know better . . . I know that it wasn't only age that brought it . . . I have had too

many misfortunes . . . I have shed too many tears . . .”

“ You have had a great deal of trouble, then ?”

“ Oh, Monsieur ! . . . In one year I lost my wife, my daughter, my two sons . . . all that I loved . . . all I had to love me. I almost died myself, but gradually I began to get better . . . But I wasn't able to work any more . . . Then it was poverty . . . destitution . . . Some days I don't have anything to eat at all. I've had nothing since yesterday but a crust of bread, and I gave half to my dog . . . With the money you have given me I shall get some more for to-night and to-morrow.”

As he listened, the beggar turned over the coppers in his pocket. He was trying to count them, distinguishing by touch the difference between the pence and halfpence. He had elevenpence-halfpenny. He said :

“ Come with me. It's too cold here. I will see that you have something to eat.”

The blind man reddened with pleasure, stammering :

“ Oh, Monsieur . . . you are too kind . . .”

“ Come . . .”

Careful that the other should not feel how wet his own clothes were, how thin, he took him by the arm, and they set off. The dog, its head up, its ears cocked, led the way through the people,

pulling sharply at its chain when they crossed a road where there was traffic. They walked on like this for a long time, finally stopping before a little restaurant in a back street.

The beggar opened the door and said to the blind man :

“ Come in . . . ”

Choosing a table near the stove, he made him sit down, and took a chair near him.

Some workmen, all of them silent, were hungrily emptying the small thick plates before them. The blind man took the lead off his dog, and held his hands out to the fire, sighing :

“ It’s very comfortable here . . . ”

The beggar called the girl who was waiting and ordered some soup and boiled beef. She asked :

“ And what will you have ? ”

“ Nothing. ”

When the soup, which smelt very appetising, and the meat were before him, the blind man began to eat slowly and in silence. The beggar watched him, cutting little bits of bread that he held under the table to the dog. The soup and meat finished, he said :

“ Have something to drink. It will put some strength into your legs. ”

Presently he called the servant :

“ How much ? ”

“ Tenpence-halfpenny. ”

He paid, leaving the remaining penny for the girl, and helped his companion to rise. When they were back in the street, he asked :

“Do you live far from here?”

“Where are we?”

“Near St. Lazare station.”

“Far enough. I sleep in a shed on the other side of the river.”

“I’ll go part of the way with you.”

The blind man kept on thanking him. He replied :

“No . . . no . . . it’s not worth mentioning . . .”

Without knowing why, he felt happy, supremely happy, happier than he ever remembered feeling. As he walked along, lost in dreamy thoughts, he forgot that he himself had been without food since yesterday, that he had no place to sleep in that night; he forgot his miseries, his rags, that he was a beggar.

From time to time he said gently to the blind man :

“Am I going too quickly? Are you very tired?”

The blind man, humble and grateful, answered :

“No . . . oh, no, Monsieur . . .”

He smiled, happy to hear himself addressed in that way, soothed alike by the illusion he was giving the other, and his own odd sensation of being a rich, charitable person . . .

On the quay, feeling the dampness of the air from the river, the blind man said :

“ Now I can find my way alone. I have my dog.”

“ Yes, I will say good-bye,” replied the beggar in a solemn voice.

For a strange thought had taken possession of him : the illusion that he had so often and so ardently desired, had it not become a reality ? Had he not at last enjoyed the sensation of perfect happiness ? Had not this last hour given him more joy than any of his wildest dreams of wealth and rich food and Love ? This blind man had no suspicion that he had been leaning on the arm of a beggar as poor as himself . . . had he not been able to believe himself rich, and could he hope ever again to feel the deep, unmixed joy of to-night ?

But the elation did not last long. Suddenly realities came back. He said a second time :

“ Yes . . . I will leave you now.”

They had reached the middle of the bridge. He stopped, felt once more in his pockets to see if by any chance a halfpenny remained there.. Not one . . .

He grasped the blind man's hand, pressed it warmly, while the other said :

“ Thank you once again, Monsieur. Will you tell me your name so that I can pray for you ?”

“It’s not worth while. Hurry out of the cold. It is I who am very happy. Good-bye . . .”

He went a little way back, stopped, looked fixedly at the dark expanse of water below him, and once again in a louder voice, said :

“Good-bye . . .”

And suddenly he leapt up on the parapet . . .

There was a great splash . . . then cries of “Help!” . . . “Run to the bank of the river!”

Pushed roughly about by the people who rushed up, the blind man cried :

“What is it? What has happened?”

Without stopping, a street urchin who had almost knocked him over, shouted :

“A beggar has made a hole in the water.”

With a weary gesture he shrugged his shoulders, murmuring :

“He at least had the courage, he had . . .”

Then, touching his dog with the toe of his boot, he trudged on, tapping the ground with his stick, his face turned up to the sky, his back bent . . . without knowing . . .

V

IN THE LIGHT OF THE RED LAMP

Seated in a large armchair near the fire, his elbows on his knees, his hands held out to the warmth, he was talking slowly, interrupting himself abruptly now and again with a murmured : " Yes . . . yes . . ." as if he were trying to gather up, to make sure of his memories ; then he would continue his sentence.

The table beside him was littered with papers, books, odds and ends of various kinds. The lamp was turned low ; I could see nothing of him except his pallid face and his hands, long and thin in the fire-light.

The purring of a cat that lay on the hearthrug and the crackling of the logs that sent up strangely shaped flames, were the only sounds that broke the silence. He was speaking in a far-away voice as a man might in his sleep :

" Yes . . . yes . . . It was the great, the greatest misfortune of my life. I could have borne the loss of every penny I possess, of my health . . . anything . . . everything . . . but not that ! " To have lived for ten years with the woman you

adore, and then to watch her die and be left to face life alone . . . quite alone . . . it was almost more than I could bear . . . It is six months since I lost her . . . How long ago it seems! And how short the days used to be . . . If only she had been ill for some time, if only there had been some warning! . . . It seems a horrible thing to say, but when you know beforehand, the mind gets prepared, doesn't it? . . . little by little, the heart readjusts its outlook . . . you grow used to the idea . . . but as it was . . ."

"But I thought she had been ill for some time?" I said.

He shook his head:

"Not at all, not at all . . . It was quite sudden . . . The doctors were never even able to find out what was the matter with her . . . It all happened and was over in two days. Since then I don't know how or why I have gone on living. All day long I wander round the house looking for some reminder of her that I never find, imagining that she will appear to me from behind the hangings, that a breath of her scent will come to me in the empty rooms . . ."

He stretched out his hand towards the table:

"Look, yesterday I found that . . . this veil, in one of my pockets. She gave it to me to carry one evening when we were at the theatre, and I try to believe it still smells of her perfume, is still

warm from its contact with her face . . . But no! Nothing remains . . . except sorrow . . . *THOUGH THERE IS SOMETHING*, only it . . . it . . .

"In the first shock of grief, you sometimes have extraordinary ideas . . . Can you believe that I photographed her lying on her death-bed? I took my camera into the white, silent room, and lit the magnesium wire: yes, overwhelmed as I was with grief, I did with the most scrupulous precaution and care things from which I should shrink to-day, revolting things. . . Yet it is a great consolation to know she is there, that I shall be able to see her again as she looked that last day."

"Where is this photograph?" I asked.

Leaning forward, he replied in a low voice:

"I haven't got it, or rather, I have it. . . I have the plate, but I have never developed it. . . It is still in the camera. . . I have never had the courage to touch it. . . Yet how I have longed to see it!"

He laid his hand on my arm:

"Listen . . . to-night . . . your visit . . . the way I have been able to talk about her . . . it makes me feel better, almost strong again . . . Would you, will you come with me to the dark-room? Will you help me to develop the plate?"

He looked into my face with the anxious,

questioning expression of a child who fears he may be refused something he longs to have.

"Of course I will," I answered.

He rose quickly :

"Yes. . . with you it will be different. With you I shall keep calm. . . and it will do me good . . . I shall be much happier . . . you'll see . . ."

We went to the dark-room, a closet with bottles ranged round on shelves. A trestle-table, littered with dishes, glasses and books, ran along one side of the wall.

By the light of a candle that threw flickering shadows round him, he silently examined the labels on the bottles and rubbed some dishes.

Presently he lit a lamp with red glass, blew out the candle, and said to me :

"Shut the door."

There was something dramatic about the darkness relieved only by the blood-red light. Unexpected reflections touched the sides of the bottles, played on his wrinkled cheeks, on his hollow temples. He said :

"Is the door closely shut? Then I will begin."

He opened a dark slide and took out the plate. Holding it carefully at the corners between his thumbs and first fingers, he looked at it intently for a long time as if trying to see the invisible picture which was so soon to appear.

"She is there," he murmured. "How wonderful!"

With great care he let it glide into the bath and began to rock the dish.

I cannot say why, but it seemed to me that the tapping of the porcelain on the boards at regular intervals made a curiously mournful sound; the monotonous lapping of the liquid suggested a vague sobbing, and I could not lift my eyes from the milk-coloured piece of glass which was slowly taking on a darker line round its edges.

I looked at my friend. His lips were trembling as he murmured words and sentences which I failed to catch.

He drew out the plate, held it up to the level of his eyes, and as I leant over his shoulder, said:

"It's coming up . . . slowly . . . My developer is rather weak . . . But that's nothing . . . Look, the high lights are coming . . . Wait . . . you'll see . . ."

He put the plate back, and it sank into the developer with a soft, sucking sound.

The gray colour had spread uniformly over the whole plate. His head bent over it, he explained:

"That dark rectangle is the bed . . . up above, that square . . ." he pointed it out with a motion of his chin . . . "is the pillow; and in the middle, that lighter part with the pale streak outlined on the background . . . that is . . . Look, there is

the crucifix I put between her fingers. My poor little one . . . my darling! . . .”

His voice was hoarse with emotion; the tears were running down his cheeks as his chest rose and fell.

“The details are coming up,” he said presently, trying to control himself. “I can see the lighted candles and the flowers . . . her hair, which was so beautiful . . . the hands of which she was so proud . . . and the little white rosary that I found in her Book of Hours . . . My God, how it hurts to see it all again, yet somehow it makes me happy . . . very happy . . . I am looking at her again, my poor darling . . .”

Feeling that emotion was again overcoming him and wishing to soothe, I said :

“Don’t you think the plate is ready now?”

He held it up near the lamp, examined it closely, and put it back in the bath. After a short interval he drew it out afresh, re-examined it, and again put it back, murmuring :

“No . . . no . . .”

Something in the tone of his voice and the abruptness of his gesture struck me, but I had no time to think, for he at once began to speak again.

“There are still some details to come up . . . It’s rather long, but as I told you, my developer is weak . . . So they only come up one by one.”

He counted; "One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . five . . . This time it will do. If I force it, I shall spoil it . . ."

He took out the plate, waved it vertically up and down, dipped it in clean water, and held it towards me :

"Look !"

But as I was stretching out my hand, he started and bent forward, holding the plate up to the lamp, and his face, lit up by the light, had suddenly become so ghastly that I cried :

"What is it? What's the matter?"

His eyes were fixed in a wide terrified stare, his lips were drawn back and showed teeth that were chattering : I could hear his heart beating in a way that made his whole body rock backwards and forwards.

I put my hand on his shoulder, and unable to imagine what could possibly cause such terrible anguish, I cried for the second time :

"But what is it? Tell me. What's the matter?"

He turned his face to me, so drawn it no longer seemed human, and as his blood-shot eyes looked into mine, he seized me by the wrist with a grip that sent his nails into my flesh.

Thrice he opened his mouth, trying to speak, then, brandishing the plate above his head, he shrieked into the crimson-lit darkness :

"The matter! . . . the matter! . . . My God! . . . I have murdered her! . . . She wasn't dead! . . . the eyes have moved! . . ."

VI

A MISTAKE

“Doctor,” said the man, “I want you to examine me and tell me whether I am suffering from tuberculosis. I want to know the truth. I have enough courage to hear the worst without flinching. I consider, too, that it is your duty to speak with perfect frankness, and that it is my right to know my exact condition. Will you promise to do as I ask?”

The doctor hesitated, pushed back his armchair, leant against the chimney-piece beneath which burned a large fire of logs, and replied :

“I give you my word. Will you undress yourself?”

While the patient took off his clothes, the doctor questioned him :

“You feel weak? You have night-sweats? . . . You have had them, but don’t now. Do you cough much? Little fits of coughing early in the morning? . . . Are your parents still alive? Do you know what they died of? . . .”

The man, his chest bare, said :

“I am ready.”

The doctor began to sound him. The sick man followed the examination carefully, listening attentively as he stood with his heels together, his arms drooping, his chin raised. In the silent room the taps of the finger sounded like a hollow scale.

Afterwards came the auscultation, long and careful. When he had finished, the doctor gave him a little slap on the shoulder and smiled :

“Dress yourself. You are very highly-strung, essentially nervous, but I can assure you there is nothing wrong, absolutely nothing . . . You don’t seem particularly glad to hear it?”

The man, who was dressing himself, stopped, his arms in the air, his head half out of the front of his shirt; there was a piercing expression in his eyes, and it was with a kind of mocking laugh that he replied :

“Oh, yes, I am . . . Very glad . . .”

He put on the rest of his clothes in complete silence. The doctor, at his desk, was writing a prescription. He stopped him with a gesture :

“Useless . . .”

He took a louis from his pocket, put it on the corner of the table, sat down, and in a voice that trembled slightly, began to talk :

“Now for a little conversation. Eighteen months ago, a patient came here asking you, just as I did a few minutes ago, to tell him the truth. You examined him quickly, it is true . . . then

trying to discover with my fingers the weak spots in my lungs. I had no pain, hardly enough discomfort to make me believe in the truth of your verdict. Such unreasonable revolts are natural. The wish father to the thought, I ended by believing that you had made an error of judgment. I said to myself: 'It's not true: it's impossible; I will consult another doctor . . .'

"Suddenly I heard coughing in the next room. I started. The cough, which came from my children's room, sounded again, dry, sharp, and ending in a sort of rattle. Terrified, I stretched out my hand towards my wife. But I was afraid to wake her, and I waited. The coughing began again. I got up quietly, and went into the room where the children slept. In the glimmer of the night-light, I could see them lying in their beds. It seemed to me that the elder one was flushed. I touched her hand. It seemed hot. I bent over her. She coughed several times and turned restlessly on her pillow. I stayed beside her a long time; she kept on coughing. I went back to bed, but hardly had I lain down when a terrible thought took possession of me: 'Like me, she is tubercular!'

"I had no doubt about it. I accepted it as a fact."

He leant forward, and his hands grasping his knees, asked:

“ You, at that moment, had no idea of what *you* had done, had you ?

“ The next day was unbearable. I dare not tell my wife that our child was ill. I had not the courage to call in a doctor. I was afraid of what he would say, of what I knew he was going to say ; I was ashamed of myself, and the cowardice kept me silent.

“ But my mind did not stand still. It was no longer only a question of contagion. A still more terrifying spectre confronted me : that of Heredity. My children had inherited my physical condition, just as they had my eyes, my hair. Even if they had escaped that awful law, the mere fact of my being near them had contaminated them.

“ Imagination, you say ? Nonsense. You and the whole fraternity, haven't you taken pains to educate the ignorant public through the newspapers and magazines, by conferences ? . . . ”

“ All that I had heard and read surged up in my memory.

“ One after another my wife and little daughters would gradually fade, dragging out martyred lives till the fatal end came. . . And I, I should watch it all : in their faces, in their wasting bodies, I should follow the progress of the disease. No science could alter the inevitable.”

He lifted his finger, and spoke in a deep, low voice.

“Then—follow me carefully—living haunted by this thought, I grew to believe that there are cases when it is a man’s duty to stop suffering which he knows to be inevitable: that he has the right to undo what he has done, to suppress, make an end of beings condemned to physical torture, the right to be the Destiny that saves them from such a fate.

“You shudder, you are afraid of understanding? . . . Yes, with my own hands I killed my children and my wife, killed, you hear me, killed them. I poisoned them, and did it so quickly and so cleverly no one ever suspected me.

“At first I meant to put an end to myself as well, but I deserved punishment, not for having killed them, for I believed my action a legitimate one, but for having brought them into the world. And what greater expiation could I have imposed on myself than that of bearing alone, full of misery, the burden of the existence from which I had saved them, the sufferings from which I had set them free?

“And now, see what happened. . . Some weeks after they were gone, strength began to come back to me. The pain in the side went, the blood-spitting ceased. I ate with appetite. I began to put on flesh. Yes, I began to grow fat.

“At first I believed that in some mysterious way the progress of the disease had momentarily stopped so that it might re-assert itself later with

greater violence. But after some months I was obliged to recognize facts : I was growing better, I was cured. I say 'cured'—had I ever been tubercular ?

"This thought, vague at first, took shape. Do you understand what it meant? If I were tubercular, what I had done was necessary. If I were not, I had murdered without excuse, for no reason.

"I gave myself a year to make sure, hoping that the arrested disease would re-appear, trying by every kind of imprudence to set it working again. Useless. Then came the conviction, the certainty, that you had been wrong, had been guilty of a shameful error of judgment. An overwhelming sadness took possession of me. I had deliberately ruined my life, killed innocent creatures, plunged myself in the years of mourning through which I was dragging my way—And why? Because of your mistake. And I have come here to-day to hear you yourself confess it, that mistake!"

He rose and crossed his arms on his chest.

"Could you have admitted it more stupidly? You didn't see my eyes just now when you assured me that there was nothing wrong with me, 'absolutely nothing!' No, for if you had seen them, you would have trembled with fear, you would have read in them what I am going to tell you . . ."

• Very pale, the doctor stammered :

"I am not infallible . . . Now-a-days, this idea of tuberculosis has become an obsession, creeps into everything . . . It influences one unconsciously . . . one is apt to give importance to a sound that may be accidental, something temporary . . . I may have been wrong . . . the greatest physicians have made mistakes in their diagnoses . . . I will examine you again . . ."

The man burst into a terrible laugh :

"You will, will you ! . . . For what kind of a fool do you take me ? You run yourself on to the point of a sword, and you think you can get free by a graceful twist ? There is nothing wrong with me ! You have told me so. Nothing, nothing, nothing ! This time—and for the best of reasons—I will accept your word without question.

"But you have made me into an assassin, and you are my accomplice. Unconscious accomplice ? I agree with you. You were the brain, and I, I was the arm. And as Justice is everlastingly the same, I——'the highly-strung, the essentially nervous'—I judge, I condemn, and I execute. You first. Myself afterwards."

. . . Two shots rang out. The servants rushed in to find two bodies lying on their backs.

Some brain and blood had splashed on to the table and made a crimson mark on an unfinished prescription that ran :

Bromide 15 grammes

Distilled water . . .

VII

EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES

It was from the newspapers that Françoise learnt that her son had been arrested.

At first she was unable to believe it; it was too monstrous.

Her lad, her little lad, so well-behaved, so shy, who just a month ago had spent his Easter leave with her; her son a thief and a murderer? . . . She seemed to see him standing before her again in his soldier's uniform, his round young face smiling and kind; she felt again on her wrinkled cheeks his hearty good-bye kisses, and filled with happy and peaceful memories of him, she shrugged her shoulders, repeating :

"Of course it's a mistake. It's someone else."

Still, there it was, written with a big head-line : "Crime of a Soldier." It had happened in his barracks, and his name was there in full.

Bewildered, she crouched in her chair, her spectacles pushed up on her forehead, her hands clasped, her mouth trembling as she talked to herself in the warm silence of the kitchen, her eyes looking vaguely at the old dog lying by the open

door, at the long clock whose slow tic-tac gravely marked the time.

Someone came in. She started violently, crying :
“ Who’s there ? ” Recognizing a neighbour, and wishing to hide her agitation, she added :

“ I was asleep . . . It’s hot . . . ”

Habitually reserved and silent, to-day she went on talking, talking, asking questions and making replies, fearing that she herself might be questioned. As she uttered her disjointed sentences, her one thought was : “ Does she know ? ”

Unable at last to think of anything else to say, she relapsed into silence. With an odd expression the neighbour said :

“ Is it long since you had news of your son ? ”

“ No . . . This morning. ”

She did not say how ! But as she spoke there came to her an overwhelming desire to be reassured, to be comforted, to hear a voice echo her indignant : “ It’s a mistake ! It’s not my lad—how could it be ! . . . ”

She held out the paper, and trying to speak easily :

“ Have you seen this ? . . . Queer, isn’t it ? ”

Her throat dry, the tears welling up in her eyes, she added :

“ I was so stupid . . . When I saw it first, it gave me quite a turn . . . What a fool . . . ”

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The neighbour still remained silent. She repeated:

"But it's strange, isn't it? . . . It's strange! . . ."

"Yes, it's odd there should be two of the same name in the same regiment."

With a great sigh of relief the old woman cried:

"That's just what I say! . . . That's it! . . . there are two of them . . . It's not mine . . ."

"I don't know anything about that," answered the woman. "I'm only asking you . . . It's to be hoped there are . . . because if it is your lad . . . They are saying it was him that robbed the cooper . . . yes, the three hundred francs that were stolen when he was home at Easter."

The mother drew herself up stiffly, white as death, her fists clenched:

"How dare they! . . . He never did it . . . never, never! . . . Aren't you ashamed of yourself? . . . What have we done to you that you put everything on us? . . . My poor little lad! Oh, but you shall all see! . . ."

And without shutting the door behind her, without even putting on her sabots, she hurried, almost running, to the railway station.

She arrived at the town just as it was striking seven. In the train, far from diminishing, her fears had grown. She was no longer saying: "It

is impossible!" but "Suppose it is true! . . ."
The journey had seemed endless, with the villages and fields rushing past her, the telegraph wires rising and falling giddily like a swing. When the train stopped, she began to tremble, almost feeling that the moment to know the truth had come too quickly. She was murmuring Paters and Aves, adding her own supplications to the prayers that came mechanically to her lips:

"O, Good Virgin, you could never have let such a thing happen, could you? . . . The beautiful prayers I shall say to you presently! . . ."

Behind the iron gate, the courtyard of the barracks stretched white in front of the square buildings. Soldiers* were sitting on the steps, chatting in the evening calm. Her boy had taught her the different ranks. Very humble, she stopped before a sergeant:

"Excuse me, Monsieur le Sergeant, I want to ask you something. I want to know . . ."

She hesitated, not daring to show her fear.

"It's this. It's about my son . . . Jules Michon of the 8rd Compagnie . . . I want to know if . . . if I can see him . . ."

She tried to smile:

"I am his mother . . . his mother . . . No? But why? . . . Where is he? . . . Is he ill? . . . Then why can't I? . . . Yes, I know . . . No, I don't know . . . He has been arrested . . . At

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the police station? . . . No? . . . In—in prison . . . you say? . . .”

She hid her face in her hands :

Holy Virgin, it was true then! Holy Virgin . . .

Almost staggering, she turned away. At the military prison she learnt that her son was in solitary confinement, and the word “solitary” increased her terror. She imagined him alone, forever shut away from everyone, fastened in. They told her to go and see a lawyer, and with the same unsteady steps she went and found a lawyer. From him she learnt the exact state of affairs. There was no possible doubt about it. Her boy had killed someone to rob them : they had found the money—nearly six hundred francs—in his mattress. He had confessed.

After much weeping and useless begging to be allowed to see him, she went back to the village. Everyone knew. Shrinking from what they might say to her, dreading their looks, she did not go home till midnight. Like a poor animal who fears blows and hides itself, she dare no longer go out, keeping her shutters closed, trembling as she lifted the paper that was pushed under her door every morning. From it she learnt not only all the details of the crime, but that her son was accused of something else. All the evidence seemed to

prove that it really was he who had robbed the cooper. But that—never! She would swear it was not true . . . But eventually she began to have doubts about even that.

At the end of a month she went back to the lawyer. She no longer asked to see her son. Not, great God, that she had ceased to love him! . . . She was ashamed . . .

“What will they do with him, Monsieur? You won’t let them take him from me”

“My poor woman, I am very much afraid they will . . . If only I could find some extenuating circumstance . . . ”

“What’s that? A circumstance . . . what does it mean?”

“It means something that will lessen the crime in the eyes of the judge. Here is an example—a man steals; if it can be proved that he did it because he was in great poverty, because his children were starving, that would be an extenuating circumstance. In this case, there’s nothing of the kind. It’s not even his first offence. That other robbery—he denies it—but—Well, well! I will do everything that can possibly be done.”

Françoise went home wearier and more heart-broken than ever, her mind tortured by those new words: “Extenuating circumstances.” How, where, could she find some excuse that could move

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the judges to clemency? . . . There was none. She could see nothing but the crime : nothing could lessen its horror.

The day of the trial came . She set out again, the last step in the ascent of her Calvary. In the train she prayed, invoking all the saints, while through her empty brain there resounded the words, so often repeated : "Extenuating circumstances . . . Extenuating circumstances . . ."

She waited in the dark, gloomy room with the witnesses, who lowered their voices because she was there. When her turn came she walked into the box with faltering steps, her eyelids blinking in the clear light, and in a moment her eyes were on her boy, who bowed his head over a handkerchief with big blue squares, and burst into short, sharp sobs . . . She drew herself up stiffly and faced the judge.

She herself had asked to go into the witness-box. Standing there, she wondered vaguely why she had insisted. She knew nothing at all about it; she had nothing to say. Why was she there? . . . For no reason at all except that she was his mother. Was it not she who had borne him . . . nursed him . . . caressed him . . . brought him up? . . . Was he not hers, her very own? . . . But no, not now; to-day he did not belong to her.

To all the questions she replied by signs or unintelligible words. There was dense silence in the

court. An infinite pity went out towards the old black-robed peasant woman, bowed by sorrow.

"He is your only child?" said the judge.

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Did you have anything to complain of when he lived with you?"

"Oh, no, Monsieur!"

"Had he any bad companions?"

"Never! His father, who was liked and respected by everyone, would not have allowed it. . . Neither would I. . . We were very highly thought of . . ."

"We know . . . we know . . ."

Then, turning to the accused :

"You knew it, too, and that is why, screening yourself behind the good reputation of your parents, you took advantage of your stay with your mother to commit a robbery. . . How could anyone suspect the son of such honest people? . . . Others may be able to say: 'I am not wholly responsible. I lived with people who set me a bad example.' You, you have no such excuse."

At this the old woman seemed to make a violent effort. A strange light shone under the tear-swollen lids of her small eyes, and, her head bowed, without a gesture, in a voice that was almost steady, she spoke.

"Forgive me, Monsieur. I see I must tell you"

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the truth. My poor lad is guilty of much, very guilty . . . But he is not the only one . . . I told you just now I had nothing to reproach myself with . . . I lied. That 800 francs of the cooper's, it was I who stole them, me . . . When my Jules came home at Easter, I told him I had done it . . . It frightened him, poor lad . . . he is very young . . . he saw his mother might lose her honour and her reputation . . . and it was to get the money back and stop my being arrested that he stole that other money . . . He was interrupted . . . he lost his head . . . and he struck the blow without knowing what he did."

She was silent for a moment, out of breath; then went on in a lower tone:

"I lied . . . I am a wicked woman. It was I who set him the bad example . . . It is me you must arrest . . . Is that an extenuating circumstance for him? . . . Forgive me, Monsieur . . ."

More bowed than ever, the shoulders drooping, the head lower, she seemed to shrink to nothing . . .

. . . The son escaped with hard labour for life. She—soon afterwards she died, scorned by all the village. They said a hasty mass for her, and laid her in a remote part of the graveyard, a corner where even on the sunniest days the shadow of the church or belfry does not reach.

This story was told me by her grave, which had no decoration but a cross of weather-beaten black wood and a single wreath of rusty beads, twisted and broken, on which, however, I could distinguish the words :

“ To Françoise Michon. From the judge who tried her son.”

VIII

THE CONFESSION

I stood still for a moment before the open door, hesitating, and it was only when the old woman who had been sent to bring me said for the second time : " It is here," that I went in.

At first I could see nothing but the lamp screened by a low-drawn shade; then I distinguished on the wall the motionless shadow of a recumbent body, long and thin, with sharp features. A vague odour of petrol and ether floated round me. But for the sound of the rain beating on the slates of the roof and the dull howling of the wind in the empty chimney, the silence was death-like.

" Monsieur," said the old woman gently, as she bent over what I now saw was a bed. "Monsieur? The gentleman you asked for is here..."

The shadow raised itself, and a faint voice said :

" Very well...leave us, Madame...leave us..."

When she had shut the door after her, the voice went on :

"Come nearer, Monsieur. I am almost blind, I have a buzzing in my ears, and I hear very

badly. Here, quite close to me, there ought to be a chair. Pardon me for having sent for you, but I have something very grave to tell you..."

The eyes in the face that craned towards me were wide open in a sort of stare, and the old man trembled as he faltered :

"But first, are you Monsieur Gernou? Am I speaking to Monsieur Gernou, the Public Prosecutor?"

"Yes."

He sighed as if with relief.

"Then at last I can make my confession. I signed my letter Perier, but that is not my real name. It is possible that if Death, so near to me now, had not already changed my face, you might vaguely recognize me... But no matter. . .

"Some years ago, many long years, I was Public Prosecutor for the Republic. I was one of the men of whom people say, 'He has a brilliant future before him,' and I had resolved to have one. I only needed a chance to prove my ability; a case at the assizes gave me that chance. It was in a small town. The crime was one that would not have attracted much attention in Paris, but there it aroused passionate interest, and as I listened to the reading of the accusation, I saw there would be a big struggle. The evidence against the prisoner was of the gravest nature, but it lacked the determining factor that will frequently draw a

confession from the criminal—or the equivalent of a confession. The man made a desperate defence. A feeling of doubt, almost of sympathy, ran through the court, and you know how great the power of that feeling is.

“But such influences do not affect a magistrate. I answered all the denials by bringing forward facts that made a strong chain of circumstantial evidence; I turned the life of the man inside out and revealed all his weak points and wrong-doings. I gave the jury a vivid description of the crime, and as a hound leads the hunters to the quarry, I ended by pointing to the accused as the criminal. Counsel for the defence answered my arguments, did his best to fight me—but it was useless. I had asked for the head of the man: I got it.

“Any sympathy I might have felt for the prisoner was quickly stifled by pride in my own eloquence. The condemnation was both the victory of the law and a great personal triumph for me.

“I saw the man again on the morning of the execution. I went to watch them wake him and prepare him for the scaffold, and as I looked at his inscrutable face, I was suddenly seized with an anguish of mind. Every detail of that sinister hour is still fresh in my memory. He showed no sign of revolt while they bound his arms and shackled his legs. I dare not look at him, for I felt

his eyes were fixed on me with an expression of superhuman calm. As he came out of the prison door and faced the guillotine, he cried twice: 'I am innocent!' and the crowds that had been prepared to hiss him suddenly became silent. Then he turned to me and said, "Watch me die, it will be well worth your while.' He embraced the priest and his lawyer... It appears that he then placed himself unaided on the planks, that he never flinched during the eternal moment of waiting for the knife, and that I stood there with my head uncovered. It appears . . . for I, I did not see, having for the moment lost all consciousness of external things.

"During the days that followed, my thoughts were too confused for me to understand clearly why I was full of some trouble that seemed to paralyse me. My mind had become obsessed by the death of this man. My colleagues said to me:

'It is always like that the first time.'

"I believed them, but gradually I became aware that there was a definite reason for my preoccupation; doubt. From the moment I realized this, I had no peace of mind. Think of what a magistrate must feel when, after having caused a man to be beheaded, he gets asking himself:

'Suppose after all he were not guilty?'

"I fought with all my strength against this idea, trying to convince myself that it was impossible,

absurd. I appealed to all that is balanced and logical in my brain and mind, but my reasonings were always cut short by the question : ' What real proof was there ? ' Then I would think of the last moments of the criminal, would see his calm eyes, would hear his voice. This vision of the scaffold was in my mind one day when some one said to me :

“ ‘ How well he defended himself ; it is a wonder he did not get off . . . Upon my word, if I had not heard your address to the Court, I should be inclined to think he was innocent. ’

“ And so the magic of words, the force of my will to succeed were what had quietened the hesitations of this spectator as they had probably triumphed over those of the jury. I alone had been the cause of his death, and if he were innocent, I alone was responsible for the monstrous crime of his execution.

“ A man does not accuse himself in this way without trying to put up some sort of a defence, without doing something to absolve his conscience, and in order to deliver myself from these paralysing doubts, I went over the case again. ’ While I reread my notes and examined my documents, my conviction became the same as before ; but they were MY notes, MY documents, the work of my probably prejudiced mind, of my will enslaved by my desire, by my need to find him guilty. I

studied the other point of view, the questions put to the accused and his answers, the evidence of the witnesses. To be quite sure about some points that had never been clear, I examined carefully the place where the crime had been committed, the plan of the streets near the house. I took in my hands the weapon the murderer had used, I found new witnesses who had been left out or neglected, and by the time I had gone over all these details twenty times, I had come to the conclusion that the man was innocent. And as if to crown my remorse, a brilliant rise in position was offered me ! It was the price of my infamy.

“ I was very cowardly, Monsieur, for I believed I did enough in tendering my resignation without assigning any reason for it. I travelled. Alas ! Forgetfulness does not lie at the end of long roads. To do something to expiate the irreparable wrong I had caused became my only desire in life. But the man had been a vagabond, without family, without friends. . . . There was one thing I could have done, the only worthy thing : I could have confessed my mistake. I had not the courage to do it. I was afraid of the anger, the scorn of my colleagues. Finally, I decided that I would try to atone by using my fortune to relieve those who were in great trouble, above all, to help those who were guilty.—Who had a better right than I to try to prevent men being condemned ?—I turned my

back on all the joys of life, renounced all comfort and ease, took no rest. Forgotten by everyone, I have lived in solitude, and aged prematurely. I have reduced the needs of life to a minimum . . . For months I have lodged in this attic, and it is here I contracted the illness of which I am dying. I shall die here, I wish to die here. . . . And now, Monsieur, I have come to what I want to ask you . . . ”

His voice became so low, I had to watch his trembling lips to help myself to understand his words.

“I do not wish this story to die with me. I want you to make it known as a lesson for all those whose duty it is to punish with justice and not because they are there *TO PUNISH IN ANY CASE*; I want it to help to bring the Spectre of the Irreparable before the Public Prosecutor when it is his duty to ask for a condemnation.”

“I will do as you ask,” I assured him.

His face was livid, and his hand shook as he gasped :

“But that is not all . . . I still have some money . . . that I have not yet had time to distribute among those who have been unfortunate. It is there . . . in that chest of drawers . . . I want you to give it to them when I am gone . . . not in my name, but in that of the man who was executed because of my mistake

thirty years ago . . . give it to them in the name of Ranaille."

I started.

"Ranaille? But it was I who defended him. I was . . ."

He bowed his head.

"I know! That is why I asked you to come . . . It was to you I owed this confession. I am Deroux, the Public Prosecutor." He tried to lift his arms towards the ceiling, murmuring:

"Ranaille . . . Ranaille . . ."

Did I betray a professional secret? Was I guilty of a breach of rules that ought to be binding? The pitiful spectacle of this dying man drew the truth from me in spite of myself, and I cried:

"Monsieur Deroux! Monsieur Deroux! Ranaille was guilty! . . . He confessed it as he went to the scaffold. He told me when he bid me good-bye there . . ."

But he had already fallen back on the pillows... I have always tried to believe that he heard me.

IX

THE EMPTY HOUSE

When he had picked the lock, the man went in, shut the door carefully and stood listening intently.

Although he knew the house was empty, the complete silence and inky darkness made an extraordinary impression on him. Never before had he experienced at one and the same time such a longing for and fear of solitude. He stretched out his hand, felt about the wall, and fastened the bolt of the door. A little reassured, he took from his pocket a small electric lamp and looked round. The white patches of light that broke the darkness moved up and down with the beating of his heart. To give himself courage he murmured,

“It’s like being in my own house.”

Forcing a smile, he stepped cautiously into the dining-room.

Everything was in the most scrupulous order. Four chairs were pushed in round the table; the reflections of the legs of another were mirrored in the shining parquet floor. Vague odours of tobacco and fruit floated in the air. He opened the drawers

CRISES

of a sideboard where table-silver stood in orderly piles: "That's better than nothing," he thought as he put it in his pocket. But at every movement the spoons and forks jingled, and though he knew that the house was empty and he could not disturb anyone, the noise agitated him and he turned away on tiptoe, leaving untouched a case of enamel and silver fruit-knives and forks.

"That's not what I've come to get," was what he said to himself to excuse his hesitation.

But the same want of resolution kept him standing by the table, fingering the silver that weighed heavily in his pocket as he looked at the door of the little salon where the closely-drawn, heavy curtains made the darkness still more dense. He made a supreme effort to dominate this unusual cowardice; and finally he walked calmly into the room with the easy step of a man who is returning to his own home after an evening with friends. He had suddenly lost the sensation of fear, and seeing a candleabra on an old chest, he struck a match, lit the candles, and carried the light round to examine the pictures on the walls, the gold photograph frames, the ornaments, the piano, the mantelpiece from beneath which there came the smell of cinders and soot. He glanced at some papers that he raised with a finger, weighed a silver statuette in his hand and put it down again, then, with a last look round the room, placed the

candelabra on the table, blew out the candles and opened the door of the bedroom.

There was no longer any shadow of hesitation. Under pretext of looking over the house, which was to let, he had some days before been able to find out where every piece of furniture stood, and its nature. At one glance his practised eye had noted the bureau where the old man was sure to keep his valuable documents, the chest where his money ought to be, the bed in the alcove, and the big wardrobe with glass doors and many drawers, the contents of which he would probably find it well worth while to examine. He extinguished his lamp, stretched out his arm, and without knocking against even a chair, walked towards the bureau. He felt the top, drew his hand along the front, placed one finger of the left hand on the lock and felt in his pocket for his keys.

He had lost a little of his calm. It was not that he had any return of the curious fear of the darkness and silence of the house that he had broken into; he now felt the feverish haste of the gambler who fingers his card before turning it up. What would he find? . . . Title-deeds? . . . Banknotes? . . . And how much? What fortune lay waiting for him here behind this plank of wood? . . .

But he could not get at his keys. He had forgotten to take them out of his pocket before putting the silver in, and they had become en-

tangled in it. As he fumbled, the spoons got into the rings of the keys, the prongs of the forks bent and pierced the lining of his coat, scratching his flesh. His impatience increased his clumsiness; he stamped his foot, swore, clenched his teeth and pulled so violently that the stuff gave way, and the keys and silver flew out and scattered over the floor with a noise like that of old iron . . . He was losing his nerve again. . . He had so nearly attained his object, and time was flying! . . . He did not know the exact hour, but it seemed as if he had been there a very long while. For the first time he became aware of the tic-tac of a clock, and the minueste seemed to be galloping along. . .

He knelt down, took a key and tried it, his ear close to the lock; no use. He took another, then a third, still another, trying them with careful movements . . . No good! No use at all! . . . His anger blazed up again, and he laughed harshly.

"Enough of that . . . Why should I spare the furniture?"

And seizing his jemmy, with one-skilful movement, he had the lock off. Then he opened the drawer and turned on his lamp.

A sigh of joy burst from him as his eyes fell on a collection of notes pinned together in packets. Slowly, methodically, he took them up, counted them, held them up to the light, then smoothed them with the back of his hand. He drew up a

THE EMPTY HOUSE

chair, sat down, and continued the search at ease. Under a bag of gold there was a thick packet of share-certificates made out in the name of the holder, shares that amounted to twenty thousand francs—a fortune! . . .

“What a pity to leave them,” he thought, “but they’re no use to me. . . .”

He replaced them. Sure now of his booty, he took his time, weighing the gold coins in his hand, comparing the surfaces of and the inscriptions on some forty and fifty-franc pieces before putting them in his breast-pocket. There was no longer any haste or agitation; success had ousted every feeling but those of relief and exultation. A heavy cart passed along the street, rattling the windows, shaking the furniture, making the silver on the ground vibrate. The familiar sound brought him back to a sense of where he was, and he took out his watch. Four o’clock—it was growing late! Gathering up the money without counting it, he looked quickly through the other drawers. There was nothing of any value to him. Some loose money had strayed among the papers and letters, and this he put in his vest pocket, murmuring:

“For out-of-pocket expenses.”

A beautiful bronze paper-weight lay on the table. He had been wise enough to leave the share-certificates and some jewellery, but this—might he not take this as a charming little souvenir. . . He

was stretching out his hand when a noise startled him: the clock was striking, four sharp little strokes. He stood still, his hand out, his fingers open . . . The silence, broken for a moment by the decisive sounds, seemed suddenly to become oppressive, solemn. There was not a vibration within the four walls, not even the imperceptible murmur of hangings when the folds stir, not a crack from the dry boards that seem to sleep by day and wake into a sort of attempt at life during the night . . . Nothing but the beating of his own pulses, the sound of the quickened tide of blood that throbbed in his temples . . . Fear gripped him again, a stupid, unusual fear—surely there was something abnormal about the nature of this silence? Why did he feel that he dare not disturb it by even a gesture? He had ceased pressing the button of his lamp and stood there in the darkness, his shoulders bent, his neck stretched forwards, his nostrils dilated, his ears straining as he bent towards the mantelshelf where the little clock had ticked so quietly . . . the ticking had ceased! Well, the clock had stopped, that was all. Was there anything terrifying about that? . . . Nevertheless, a shiver ran down his back; some immediate and terrible danger seemed to be threatening him, and he seized his knife, turned on his lamp and wheeled quickly round.

In the alcove, half hidden in the shadow, he saw

the face of an old man. The mouth was half open, and two terrible eyes were looking fixedly at him. There was no expression of fear; the eyes looked unflinchingly into his own, the hand that was stretched out over the sheet did not tremble, the leg that hung down below the coverings was steady. Someone was going to take him by the throat; in a moment he would feel on his face the breath of this pale and silent adversary.

Without daring to move his head, he turned his eyes to look for the door. The bank-notes had fallen to the floor, forgotten; he had but one idea—to flee! But, from the menace in the eyes, he saw that he would never manage to reach the door, that the old man was opening his mouth to cry for help, and that once the cry had sounded, it would be too late to escape; and without a second's hesitation, like a beast defending itself, he rushed to the bed, raised his knife, and with a cry of rage thrust it twice in the body up to the hilt. There was no moan; not a sound; a pillow fell softly to the ground and the head slipped sideways on the bolster, the lips half-open, the chin on the chest.

Still trembling with fear and passion, he drew back and looked at his victim. The light of the lamp was too small to allow him to distinguish either the rent made by the knife in the disordered shirt or any trace of blood. Apparently the stroke had gone straight to the heart, for the expression

of the face had not changed. The first thrust, well-aimed and lightning-swift, had stopped life as suddenly as if it had been a shot from a revolver. Proud of his skill, he muttered menacingly :

“ So you were at home watching me ! Well, you have seen, haven't you ? ”

But as he bent over the quiet face and noted that the expression was the same, it flashed into his mind that the knife might only have pierced the coverings, that perhaps the old man was still alive, still watching him with the same supreme irony.

He raised the knife again and drove it in, drew it out and brought it down with savage frenzy, and intoxicated by the dull sound it made as it entered the chest, he continued to strike, exciting himself by oaths and exclamations that he forgot to stifle. The shirt was now in rags, the flesh one large wound. But untouched by the knife, the face still kept its impassive calm, its terrifying stare. He lost his head, and flinging his lamp away, seized the old man by the throat to give a last certain stroke.

But his right hand remained up in the air, and the cry of rage did not pass his lips, for under the other hand he felt, not the damp and throbbing flesh from which life was escaping in a flow of blood, but flesh that had no last quiver of life in it, which was cold with the awful iciness that is like

nothing else in the world—dead flesh, dead for long hours . . . His arm fell.

He had never been afraid of crime. His knife had often been red : his face had been wet with the warm stream that leaps from severed arteries : he knew the smell of blood, the death-rattle that comes when life is flowing from the body . . . Death caused by his own hands was nothing . . . But this ! . . . An instinctive respect for the Dead suddenly rose from some obscure depths in his murderer's soul, and a superstitious fear of the Great Mystery froze him . . . He had believed the house was empty, and he had shut himself in with a corpse . . . A corpse . . . This, then, accounted for the unearthly silence and the pall-like mystery of the darkness. . . •

Somewhere in the far distance a clock struck five, and without daring to turn his head towards the abandoned spoils, with his hat in his hand and vague memories of prayer rising in his terrified mind, he stumbled over the furniture and fled from the house. . .

X

THE TEST

Not a muscle quivered as the man stood with his gaze fixed on the dead woman.

Through half-closed eyes he looked at the white form on the marble slab with a red gash between the breasts where the cruel knife had entered. In spite of its rigidity, the body had kept its rounded beauty and seemed alive. Only the hands, with their too-transparent skin and violet finger-nails, and the face with its glazed, wide-open eyes and blackened mouth, a mouth that was set in a horrible grin, told of the eternal sleep.

An oppressive silence weighed on the dreary stone-paved hall. Lying on the ground beside the dead woman was the sheet that had covered her : there were blood-stains on it. The magistrates were closely watching the accused man as he stood unmoved between the two warders, his head well up, a supercilious expression on his face, his hands crossed behind his back.

The examining magistrate opened the proceedings :

“Well, Bourdin, do you recognise your victim?”

The man moved his head, looking first at the magistrate, then with reflective attention at the dead woman as if he were searching in the depths of his memory.

"I do not know this woman," he said at length in a slow voice. "I have never seen her before."

"Yet there are witnesses who will state on oath that you were her lover . . ."

"The witnesses are mistaken. I never knew this woman."

"Think well before you answer," said the magistrate, after a moment's silence. "What is the use of trying to mislead us? This confrontation is the merest formality, not at all necessary in your case. You are intelligent, and if you wish for any clemency from the jury, I advise you in your own interests to confess."

"Being innocent, I have nothing to confess."

"Once again, remember that these denials have no weight at all. I myself am prepared to believe that you gave way to a fit of passion, one of these sudden madresses when a man sees red . . . Look again at your victim . . . Can you see her lying there like that and feel no emotion, no repentance? . . ."

"Repentance, you say? How can I repent of what I have not done? . . . As for emotion, if mine was not entirely deadened, it was at least considerably lessened by the simple fact that I knew

what I was going to see when I came here. I feel no more emotion than you do yourself. Why should I? I might just as well accuse you of the crime because you stand there unmoved."

He spoke in an even voice, without gestures, as a man would who had complete control of himself. The overwhelming charge left him apparently undisturbed, and he confined his defence to calm, obstinate denials.

One of the minor officials said in an undertone :

"They will get nothing out of him . . . He will deny it even on the scaffold."

Without a trace of anger, Bourdin replied :

"That is so, even on the scaffold."

The sultry atmosphere of an impending thunderstorm added to the feeling of exasperation caused by this struggle between accusers and accused, by this obstinate "no" to every question in the face of all evidence.

Through the dirty window-pane the setting sun threw a vivid golden glare on the corpse.

"So be it," said the magistrate : "You do not know the victim. But what about this?"

He held out an ivory-handled knife, a large knife with clotted blood on its strong blade.

The man took the weapon in his hands, looked at it for a few seconds, then handed it to one of the warders and wiped his fingers.

"That? . . . I have never seen it before."

"Systematic denial . . . that is your plan, is it?" sneered the magistrate. "This knife is yours. It used to hang in your study. Twenty people have seen it there."

The prisoner bowed.

"That proves nothing but that twenty people have made a mistake."

"Enough of this," said the magistrate. "Though there is not a shadow of doubt about your guilt, we will make one last decisive test. There are marks of strangulation on the neck of the victim. You can clearly see the traces of five fingers, particularly long fingers, the medical expert tells us. Show these gentlemen your hands. You see?"

The magistrate raised the chin of the dead woman.

There were violet marks on the white skin of the neck: at the end of every bruise the flesh was deeply pitted, as if the nails had been dug in. It looked like the skeleton of a giant leaf.

"There is your handiwork. Whilst with your left hand you were trying to strangle this poor woman, with your free right hand you drove this knife into her heart. Come here and repeat the action of the night of the murder. Place your fingers on the bruises of the neck . . . Come along . . ."

Bourdin hesitated for a second, then shrugged his shoulders and said in a sullen voice:

"You wish to see if my fingers correspond? . . . and suppose they do? . . . What will that prove? . . ."

He moved towards the slab: he was noticeably paler, his teeth were clenched, his eyes dilated. For a moment he stood very still, his gaze fixed on the rigid body, then with an automaton-like gesture, he stretched out his hand and laid it on the flesh.

The involuntary shudder that ran through him at the cold, clammy contact caused a sudden, sharp movement of his fingers, which contracted as if to strangle.

Under this pressure, the set muscles of the dead woman seemed to come to life. You could see them stretch obliquely from the collar-bone to the angle of the jaw: the mouth lost its horrible grin and opened as if in an atrocious yawn, the dry lips drew back to disclose teeth encrusted with thick, brown slime.

Everyone started with horror.

There was something enigmatic and terrifying about this gaping mouth in this impassive face, this mouth open as if for a death-rattle from beyond the portals of the grave, the sound only held back by the swollen tongue that was doubled back in the throat.

Then, all at once, there came from that black

hole a low, undefined noise, a sort of humming that suggested a hive, and an enormous blue-bottle with shining wings, one of these charnel-house flies that live on death, an unspeakably filthy beast, flew out, hissing as it circled round the cavern as if to guard the approach. Suddenly it paused . . . then made a straight course for the blue lips of Bourdin.

With a motion of horror, he tried to drive it away: but the monstrous thing came back, clinging to his lip with all the strength of its poisonous claws.

With one bound the man leapt backwards, his eyes wild, his hair on end, his hands stretched out, his whole body quivering as he shrieked like a mad-man :

“I confess! . . . I did it! . . . Take me away! . . . Take me away! . . .”

XI

POUSSETTE

Every morning as the clocks of the town struck six, the old maid left her house, shutting the door carefully behind her, and grasping tightly in her hand an old prayer-book with broken corners and greasy pages, crossed the road quickly and hurried to the neighbouring church to hear the first mass.

There, in the almost empty nave, kneeling on her prie-dieu, her hands clasped, her head trembling, the murmur of her prayers mingled with the voice of the priest. The service finished, she went quickly home.

Her face was thin, and her narrow, obstinate forehead was covered with lines, but her deeply-set eyes flamed with a strange fever.

As she walked, she mumbled prayers and counted the beads of her rosary. Her heels made no sound on the pavement, and round her there floated a vague smell of incense and damp stones, as if long years of church-going had impregnated her yellow fingers and pointed knees with the odour of the old vestry and the vaults.

She lived alone in a little house in a suburb, sur-

rounded by old-fashioned furniture, ancient portraits and religious emblems, her only companion a grey cat she called Poussette, a thin old cat that lay half-asleep all day, glancing with an indifferent eye at the movements of the flies, sometimes rising lazily to look through the window-panes at a leaf carried on the wind.

The old maid and the old cat understood each other. Both of them loved their hermit-like existence, the silence of the long summer afternoons with the shutters closed, the curtains drawn. They were afraid of the streets, which seemed to them full of dangers.

Hidden behind the persiennes the old maid watched the passers-by, listening to their footsteps dying away in the distance; and the cat stretched out its neck, drew itself up on three legs and turned away from the other cats that crouched by the doors, licking themselves with their heads bent back or disappearing like dark flashes as they ran away.

In bygone days, when the warm fragrant silence of night seemed to bathe the motionless trees in Love, the cat would sometimes stretch out its neck towards the gardens, replying to the calls of the males whose shadows moved on the roofs; and, excited by their entreaties, she would rub her flanks against the legs of the chairs.

Then the old maid used to snatch her up, shut

her in the bed-room, open the window, and cry in a voice of hate :

“Go away! . . . Go away! . . .”

The miaulings would cease for a moment, and when they broke out afresh and the shadows began to leap again, she would shut the shutters, draw the curtains closely, and shrinking in her bed, draw the cat under the clothes so that it should not hear the noise, stroking it between the ears to soothe it to sleep.

A fury took possession of her at the mere thought of the caresses of Love. Proud of her virginity, she hated all that was not chaste, and the functions of the Flesh seemed to her a diabolical thing by which the Tempter soiled, made vile, both beast and man. She reddened with anger when she saw lovers arm-in-arm in the moonlight, birds flying after each other at night, doves joining their beaks at the edge of their nests.

At one time the cat had been beautiful, with shining fur and firm, round limbs, and neighbours had more than once asked its mistress :

“Will you lend her to us? She and our cat would have such beautiful kittens.”

“No! I wish to keep her for myself . . .” she had answered, frowning as she drew the creature against her flat chest.

By degrees the animal had become ugly. Its sterile flanks had fallen in. In the cloister-like

atmosphere, Poussette seemed to have forgotten her instinct. Her ardent flesh had slowly but surely lost its virility, and she no longer seemed to hear the insistent calls of the males.

One summer night, however, she became restless, left the armchair where she slept, and began to prow! about in the shadow. Outside on the roof-gutters the cats were miauling. She stretched out her paws, dug her claws into the carpet, beat her sides with her tail, and responding suddenly to a surge of nature, slipped out through the half-open door into the garden.

When she found herself with the others, the long-repressed instinct woke into vibrating life. Her jaws distended, her claws clinging to the slates, she flung herself among the males, her cries mingling with their calls, yelling joyfully as they bit her.

- The noise awakened the old maid, and she sat up in bed to listen. Never had the cries of the Flesh sounded so loudly, rung so triumphantly in her ears. She got up quickly to protect her animal from them, and not finding her on the armchair, called :

“Poussette! . . . Little Poussette! . . . Come here! . . . Come! . . .”

Usually one word brought the cat to her side. This time there was no response. Looking about, she found that the door was half open and she was seized with fear, not that someone might have

broken in, but the fear that Poussette had escaped. She struck a match, and while the little blue flame flickered without giving any light, she murmured :

“It’s not possible! . . . Mon Dieu! . . . Poussette! . . .”

But when the candle was lit she gave a cry of rage.

Poussette was not there.

Out into the garden, full of flower-scent and moonlight, she rushed, calling, calling . . .

Up on the roof, the cat, now appeased, was gently rubbing itself against the side of its companion; it looked fixedly, disdainfully, at her for a moment, then fell back to its caressings, its head bent forwards, its body stretched out.

When the old maid set out for church at six o’clock, Poussette was still missing.

When the service was finished she hastened back, forgetting to tell her beads. She had paid but scant attention to the mass, kneeling and rising mechanically, her mind tortured by memories of the night.

She found the cat lying on a chair, sleeping so soundly that it scarcely moved an ear when it was called.

Livid with rage, she seized it by the neck and flung it on the floor. The surprised animal stood still for a second, yawned, arched its back, sat

down, blinked its eyelids, then, its whole body slack, rolled itself up and went to sleep again.

From that moment the old maid kept it at a distance, shrinking from it as from something impure. If it approached, she pushed it away with her foot :

“Get away! Get away!”

Sometimes, livid with rage, she lifted it up between her thin fingers, glared into its eyes and flung it on the ground : or if the cat got in her way, she seized and beat it on the head, on the shoulders, the flanks, above all, on the flanks, finding in this chastisement a ferocious and holy joy. The beast submitted to all this without a sign of revolt.

This went on for six weeks. The old maid avoided her neighbours as might a mother who dreads hearing the name of an unworthy child.

One morning when she had beaten the cat harder than usual, and was belabouring its belly, the beast leapt up, its paw raised, its fur bristling.

“Ah!” cried the old maid, “you are going to begin to scratch me now, are you? We’ll see about that . . .”

But hardly had she raised her hand, when the cat made a bound towards her face, digging its claws into her cheeks.

Terrified, she gave a loud shriek and fled to her bedroom, her face covered with blood.

For her Poussette was now a diabolical animal,

and she dare not open her door, fearing she would see again its flaming eyes and threatening teeth.

Kneeling on her prie-dieu, she shuddered :

“The Demon is after me! . . . The Demon is here in this house! . . .”

At night she crouched in her bed with her eyes open, her chin on her knees, listening to every sound, feeling no fatigue as she muttered :

“The Demon! . . . The Demon! . . .”

Soon she had no longer the strength to speak, and her lips trembled over words she could no longer hear.

When nearly a week had gone by, surprised not to see her at mass, the priest called at her house. Some of the neighbours joined him as he stood knocking at the door.

“Something must be wrong. We would have gone in to see if we could do anything for her, but we dare not, she is so rude . . . With you it will be different . . . She will be glád to see you . . .”

They knocked at the shutters : no reply. They knocked again : silence.

“Yes, something must be wrong,” murmured the priest.

He turned the handle of the door. It opened, and the neighbours followed him in .

Everything was in order. In the dining-room the remains of breakfast were still on the table. Some coffee, covered with a grey skim, was in the

bottom of a cup. Flies buzzed round a piece of sugar, and little curls of butter, very yellow, were melting on a plate.

"Perhaps she is in her bedroom?" hazarded a woman.

They opened the door. At first they could not see anything, for the shutters were closed and the curtains closely drawn. The woman bent her head to listen and whispered :

"There is someone here ! . . . Listen . . . someone is breathing."

A man went forward, drew the curtains, opened the window and pulled back the shutters ; a flood of sunshine poured in.

The old woman was crouching in a corner near the foot of the unmade bed ; she had nothing on but a chemise that showed her thin chest, and her disordered hair hung about her. Seeing the figures bending over her, she hid her face, which was covered with caked blood, in her hands, shuddering as she moaned :

"Satan ! Satan ! The Demon ! . . ."

The priest tried to take her hand, to speak to her :

"Don't you know me ? . . . It is I . . . your priest . . ."

But she only cried the louder, her nails digging into her forehead :

"Satan ! The Demon ! The Demon ! . . ."

He shook his head and said sadly :

“Alas, our poor friend has lost her reason. She, so pious ! . . . Who would have thought it possible ? What can have happened to her ? Look ! She has been tearing her face with her own hands. Go and bring a doctor. I will stay here with her.”

While they hurried out on their errand and the old maid continued to mutter in a hoarse voice : “the Demon ! the Demon ! . . .” the priest went back to the dining-room where he stooped with a smile to caress the cat. It was lying stretched out on its side, its chin up, its eyes half-closed, purring as it offered its rose-coloured teats to three kittens . . .

XII

THE FATHER

When the last spadeful of earth had been shovelled in and the last handshake given, the father and son went home, walking slowly, as if every step were an effort. They were silent, for there had suddenly fallen on them the great weariness that follows an effort that has been too long sustained.

The house, still impregnated with the scent of flowers, the house, calm again after the agonies, the comings and goings of the last few days, seemed strangely empty and new. The old servant who had come home before them had put all in order. They had the feeling of having returned after a long journey, but there was no joy in the home-coming, nothing of that deep sigh that means: "Ah! How good to be in one's own place again! . . ." Yet outwardly all was as before. Curled up in a ball, a cat purred softly before the fire; the winter sun shone with mild brightness on the window-panes.

The father sat down by the fire, shook his head and sighed:

"Your poor mother . . ."

Two tears rolled down the kind round face which

was congested by sorrow, the cold of the street, and the warmth of the room.

Presently, moved by the desire to hear something more than the purring of the cat, the tic-tac of the clock, and the crackling of the wood in the grate, conscious, perhaps of a kind of satisfaction in still being alive while others had gone for ever, he began to talk :

“Did you see the Duponts ? They were all there ; the presence of the grandfather touched me very much . . . Your mother was very fond of them all . . . How was it your friend Brémard wasn’t there ? . . . But perhaps he was ; in such a crowd one can’t see everyone . . . ”

He sighed again : “ My poor lad ! ” . . . his thoughts turning with redoubled tenderness to this big son of twenty-five who sat silently near him, his mournful eyes fixed on the fire.

The old servant came quietly in, so quietly they did not hear her open the door.

“ Come, come, sir, you mustn’t sit here like this ! You must have something to eat.”

They raised their heads.

It was true. They must eat. Life must go on as before. They were hungry, not with the delightful hunger of the days when it was a pleasure to sit down to a well-spread table, but with the hunger of the animal whose stomach is empty. Till now a kind of self-consciousness had held them back. As

she spoke, they looked at each other silently, both desiring, yet fearing, the first tête-à-tête at a table made too large by an empty place.

And the father, the tears again rising in his eyes, murmured :

“ Yes, you are quite right . . . Get dinner ready . . . You must eat something, my boy . . . ”

The son nodded and rose :

“ I will change my coat, then I will come.”

He went out, shutting the door behind him. His steps went automatically towards his mother's room, and his hand was on the door-handle when the old servant approached, saying in a low voice :

“ Monsieur Jean, I have something for you . . . a letter your mother gave me eight days ago, just after she knew she couldn't get well . . . She told me to give to you . . . when it was all over . . . Here it is.”

Surprised, he stopped and stared at her. She was looking at him in a curious, hesitating way : the fingers in which she held the envelope were trembling, and instantly he had the conviction that some great secret, some great sorrow, was about to be revealed to him.

His throat contracting, he said :

“ Give it to me . . . ” and went into the room.

Without noticing what he was doing, he turned the key in the door.

The room, with the bed too flat, the curtains too

far drawn, the grate fireless, and the furniture arranged in too orderly a way, had already a look of being disused, deserted.

For some time he stood turning the letter about in his fingers, transfixed by the sight of the living handwriting of the dead woman, the dear familiar writing, that here on the slightly crumpled envelope showed itself less firm than usual.

Through a partition of curtained glass he could hear the comings and goings of the servant who was preparing dinner in the next room.

He tore open the envelope and read :

“ My beloved child,

I feel that the moment for the eternal farewell is very near. I go without fear, almost without regret, knowing you are a man now, and for a long time have been able to get on without my help. My conscience tells me I have been the best of mothers. Yet a very grave secret lies between us, one I have never had the courage to tell you, but which it is essential you should know.

“ The woman you have so much loved and, above all, respected, she to whom you ran with every childish trouble, to whom you have brought all the perplexities of your manhood, your mother, my darling, has been guilty of a great sin . . . You are not the son of the man you have always called ‘ father.’

"There has been in my life a great, an immense love, and my chief fault has been that I have never confessed it. Your father, your real father, is alive. He has watched you grow up, and he loves you. You are now old enough to decide the big things of life for yourself. You can completely change your life if you wish to do so. You can be rich to-morrow if you have the courage that has always failed me. I know I am doing a cowardly thing . . . but having acted so badly during my life, it seems inevitable I should end in the same way. A hundred times I have been on the point of leaving the house, taking you away with me. But I have not had the energy to do it. The slightest thing would have given me that energy: a suspicion . . . a harsh word . . . But there has never been anything . . . Not a cloud . . ."

He ceased reading, overcome by the revelation. His mother had consistently deceived her husband . . . She had been able to live a lie all these years. She had been able to go on talking and smiling without in any way betraying either her wrong-doing or any kind of repentance! And he, till now pitiless towards the weakness of women, he for whom all pride, all joy, all veneration had been summed up in the word: "Mother . . ." he had grown up there an intruder, a living insult to the good man whose

attitude towards him had invariably been one of kindness, of tenderness . . .

All his childhood rose before. He saw himself again a tiny child walking along the street clinging to his father's hand . . . He grew older . . . For months a very severe illness had held him between life and death, and he saw again his father sitting by his bedside, tears in his eyes as he tried to smile . . . Time went on . . . Business troubles had come, and memories were of a still more touching kind . . . the conversations he had overheard at night after he had been tucked into bed. The mother very quiet: the father saying: "I will retrench in every possible way . . . I will give up smoking . . . I will give up cafés, and my club . . . My clothes are still quite good . . . Whatever happens, the child must not suffer . . . The bad moment will soon pass . . . If I economize in every way we shall be able to prevent his feeling it . . . These little ones have all their lives to suffer in . . . it is cruel to sadden them while they are young . . ."

And this was the man she had deceived.

He sat down and buried his head in his hands. A phrase in the letter came back to him. "You are old enough now to decide the big things of life for yourself."

It was true. He had not the right even to hesitate. The idea of money never crossed his mind.

It was just a question of having the courage she had lacked. He would leave the house without saying anything about it . . . He would go away somewhere, far away, and never come back. In that way the shame, the shame that he now knew of, would go with him. How could he ever sit down again at that table without flushing as he listened to the kind voice calling him: "My dear boy," and talking fondly of the "poor mother"? He had made his decision, but he was sobbing:

"Oh, mother! mother! What have you done! . . ."

It was good-bye to the quiet home-life, the daily return to a house made sacred by memories: he could not, must not, had not the right to carry on the lie.

As he sat motionless, lost in his sad thoughts, a sound came from the dining-room.

"Poor boy . . . He feels it so deeply . . . He is in his mother's room . . . Let him stay there if he wants to . . . How it has changed our lives . . . I feel as if I have grown old, old. Thank God I still have him! He is a good boy: he won't leave me."

He raised his head, biting his lips. The father went on talking, and as he listened, his thoughts went off in another direction. The course on which he had decided seemed less easy, his duty not so clear.

“He won’t leave me . . .”

Had he the right to abandon this poor soul, to leave him to grow old alone in a deserted home? . . . To go away—was that all he could do to repay his unfailing kindness, his efforts, his self-denial?

But he was not his son . . . His presence under this roof had in it something intolerable, odious . . . Yet he must decide at once; if he hesitated, it would be too late.

He was still holding his mother’s letter. He went on reading :

“The slightest thing would have given me that energy: a suspicion . . . a harsh word . . . But there has never been anything . . . not a cloud . . .”

Behind the partition, the voice of the father was saying :

“Yes, I lived twenty-seven years with her, and during the whole of that time there was never a cloud . . .”

The same words . . . the same phrase . . .

He went back to the letter :

“And now I am going to tell you the name of your real father. It is . . .”

The paper trembled in his fingers. If he turned the page, the name would be for ever engraved in his eyes, in the depth of his being . . . and then . . . then . . . he could no longer . . .

The voice called gently :

“Come along, dear lad, dinner is waiting on the table . . .”

He threw his head back, and shut his eyes for a second. Then he took a match, raised his arm, and set fire to the paper. He watched it slowly burning, and when the flame got down to his nails, he opened his fingers. A square of black ash fell on the floor. A little white corner burnt itself out . . . Nothing was left . . .

He opened the dining-room door, looked for a moment at the good man who stood waiting for him, the mild face full of affection, the eyelids swollen, the hands trembling—and with a gesture like that of a child, he flung his arms round the stooping shoulders as we embrace beloved beings we had imagined we should never see again. And there was a catch in his voice that sounded like a sob as he said :

“Father! My dear old father!”

XIII

FOR NOTHING

Certainly this Jean Gautet did not look like a dangerous criminal.

He was a sickly little being of uncertain age with an air of premature suffering. The eyes that wandered about behind the eyeglasses, which from time to time he adjusted on his nose with a quick movement, were quiet and mild: he had the look of a child who fears being scolded rather than that of an assassin.

But, arrested a few hours after he had committed the crime, he had not even attempted to defend himself, had confessed the moment the policeman laid a hand on his arm. Since then he had taken refuge in almost complete silence.

"Why don't you explain your action?" said the judge at length. "Seeing you declare you did not know your victim, seeing you did not steal any thing from his house, why did you kill him?"

"For no particular reason . . ."

"You must have had a reason. . . No one goes to a man's house and drives a knife into him without a motive. . . Why did you do it?"

“For nothing . . .”

“Had he harmed you in any way? . . .”

This time he flinched, lowered his eyes, made a vague gesture, and murmured :

“No . . .”

But suddenly changing his tone, he added :

“Well, yes! . . . It wasn't for nothing . . . There was a reason . . . If I have kept silent all this time it is because I didn't explain at first and it was hard to do it afterwards . . . Some confessions are very difficult to make . . .

“I am an illegitimate child. My mother had to work very hard to keep me. I had a joyless childhood . . . Too many tears were shed in my home. At school they called me ‘the bastard’ . . . I didn't understand. I soon found it meant something very sad, for when I asked my mother about it, she hid her face in her hands and cried. Instinctively I avoided using the word again. She never complained and never told me her story till she lay on her death-bed . . . I was then fourteen years old.

“At fourteen I found myself alone in the world, without relatives, without friends, tired of life before I had begun to live.

“Just at first it was not too bad. I found a place where they fed me and gave me a bed. From time to time they gave me old clothes . . . The years passed . . . When I was twenty I be-

came dependent on myself, and then I learnt what poverty meant . . . For two years I had to keep myself entirely on twenty-five francs a week, and as I wasn't a labourer—I was a clerk in a wholesale house—it was necessary for me to be properly dressed . . . To get clothes I had to economise in what I spent on food. I could only afford one meal a day—and there was very little of that . . . Sometimes I became faint and giddy in the streets, had to lean against a wall to keep myself from falling . . . Hunger, of course . . .

“One morning when I got to the office my employer said to me :

‘I am not pleased with the way you are doing your work. For some time now you have been making mistakes. You don't seem to concentrate on what you are doing . . . Then you are careless about your appearance, and I don't like that . . . My clerks must look neat and respectable.’ He touched the frayed revers of my coat. ‘That's not the way to come to this office.’

“I tried to make excuses, but he wouldn't listen.

“‘Nonsense! A man need never be ragged.’

“The other clerks were coming and going as he spoke, and I felt the blood rush to my head at the thought that they might hear . . .

“That day I had nothing at all to eat.

“When the stomach is empty, the brain works. The tears kept coming into my eyes as I bent over

my desk. I wept from hunger and shame, and as I sat there in despair there came to me for the first time the idea that I could not be alone in the world seeing that my father was still alive. After all, I had a father. The thought comforted and strengthened me. I resolved to go and find him. I would explain my position to him. As he was rich, he would be almost sure to help me when he knew my circumstances. Was I not his son?

"Next day I rang his bell. I felt almost tenderly disposed towards him. He was a little, bowed, old man with a pallid face and shuffling walk; everything about him showed he was ill, worn out. He said:

" 'Who are you? What do you want?'

"The tone of his voice froze me. I stammered as I tried to explain the object of my visit. But hardly had I begun when, trembling, he interrupted me.

" 'Not so loud . . . Lower your voice . . . Someone may hear . . .'

"He got rid of me as quickly as possible, pushing me towards the door with vague words.

" 'Leave me your address . . . I will see what I can do for you . . . Yes . . . I will see . . . I am ill . . . I will write to you . . .'

* "I went home trying to collect my ideas.

"I waited a whole week; he made no sign. I dared not go back to see him, fearing I might upset

him again. I told myself he could never let me die of hunger. I took to walking near his house. As far as I could without letting them guess my secret, I got the neighbours to talk.

“ ‘Oh!’ said one of them, ‘if you are hoping to move him in any way, you’d better give it up at once . . . He has no more heart than a paving stone. In any case, his money won’t be of any use to him much longer. He is so ill he can hardly drag himself about . . .’

“I risked asking whether he had any relatives or friends.

“ ‘Friends!’ the man shrugged his shoulders. ‘As to relatives, he may have a great-nephew in some corner of France, but he won’t get anything. Everything he has will go to the woman who has been his housekeeper for fifteen years. She boasts about it. She declares he has often told her that not a half-penny of his money is to go to his family, that he is not such a fool as to let his death make them rich, that she is to have everything. You will guess whether she counts the coppers.’

“Suddenly I began to hate my father. Was not he not the cause of all my misfortunes?

“I went away and wandered about the streets, paying no attention to where I was going. A sense of injury blotted out every other feeling. I must have been walking a very long while when, almost

fainting with hunger, I went into a low eating-house, near the fortifications. I think it was . . . When I had paid the bill I had not one farthing left, and there were still six days before the end of the month. What was to become of me? As I wondered, my fingers touched the knife I had used to cut my bread. It was a long knife, thin, pointed. I don't know why I took it, but I did.

"I am not trying to excuse myself, to lessen my crime, but the feeling of having that knife in my pocket, close against my side, turned my brain . . . I grasped the handle . . . I tried the blade with my fingers . . . And without knowing how or why it happened, I found myself standing in front of my father's house.

"I didn't argue with myself about it; there was no fighting against any horrible ideas. I wasn't thinking at all. Deliberately, without any kind of hesitation, I rang the court-yard bell . . . the door opened. I muttered the first name that came into my head . . . and I went up the stairs.

"When I got to the door of my father's flat I stopped, vaguely aware of the madness of what I was doing. If I rang, no one would open the door at that hour of night . . . If I made any noise, the neighbours would come out to see what was the matter . . . I should be flung downstairs.

"I felt in my pocket for the key of my own door and slipped it quietly in the keyhole. It

went in without a sound . . . I turned it as easily as a burglar would . . . Something gave way . . . The door opened. I was so stupified by the coincidence of the key of my door exactly fitting his, I stood perfectly still in the dark for some seconds, asking myself for the first time what I was doing there.

“At the same moment I saw a line of light on the carpet. Very quietly I opened a second door.

“A man—my father—was sitting with his back to me. He did not raise his head.

“A lamp with a lowered green shade lit the table over which he was bending. All the rest of the room was in deep shadow. He was writing. I could only see his bald head and thin shoulders. Holding my breath, I stole behind him and drew myself up on tiptoe. A large sheet of paper lay on his blotter. I read :

THIS IS MY WILL

Underneath there were three lines of smaller writing. The words the neighbours had spoken flashed into my mind, and I seemed to see the avaricious old servant who had taken the place that ought to have been my mother's.

“A frenzy ran through me. So I, his son, I, who was going to die of hunger, I was beside him starving at the very moment when with a few strokes of his pen he was going to do this abomin-

able thing, make it irrevocable. Not a halfpenny, not a farthing, would come to me, his own flesh and blood, who would die for need of it . . . All was for the old harridan who was counting the minutes till he died . . . It was impossible. He should not do it . . . I bent forward and read :

“ ‘ I leave all I possess, money, property . . . ’ ”

I ground my teeth. He started violently, turned his head, and seeing my face, which at that moment must have been terrifying, cried out, with an instinctive movement covering the paper with his arm as if to prevent my seeing it.

“ The knife was in my hand . . . I drove it forward and, with a force that seemed to make my own bones creak, sent the blade through his neck above his collar . . . ”

“ Then I realized what I had done . . . I rushed away . . . You know the rest . . . ”

He took off his eyeglasses and dried his eyes. Drops of sweat were running down his face ; he was trembling violently.

The judge, who had been watching him closely, unfolded a large sheet of paper stained with a brown mark, and said :

“ And you read nothing else on this page ? ”

He shook his head.

“ Well, listen. I will read the rest to you :

‘ THIS IS MY WILL

‘I leave all I possess, money, property, and furniture to Jean Gautet, my son, asking him to forgive me for having been the bad father I——’

“ You didn’t leave him time to finish.”

The murderer drew himself up with a jerk, his eyes wild, his mouth gaping as he stammered :

“ To my son ? . . . Me ? . . . I ? . . . ”

There was a pause, then he burst into a shriek of wild laughter, beating his head, and swaying about as he yelled :

“ I am rich ! I am rich ! ”

He had gone mad.

XIV

IN THE WHEAT

With long strokes, slow and rhythmic, Jean Madek thrust his scythe into the wheat, and at the touch of the blade, the sheaths that quivered at the end of the stalks fell down with a soft frou-frou like silk.

He advanced, measuring his steps by the supple balance of his arms, and behind him the ground showed itself brown, spotted here and there by groups of stones, bristling with thick-set sprigs of reddish straw.

His old mother followed him, her back bent as she gathered up the scattered stalks, and seeing only her feet dragging their heavy sabots, her two wrinkled and knotted hands and her body covered with rags, one might have imagined she was some animal crouching on its four feet.

The sun mounted in the horizon. A heavy heat weighed on everything, wrapping the country in torpor, and the field looked like a large piece of ripe fruit, its sap rising in a penetrating perfume.

.Gleaning steadily, the old woman grumbled:

"What's your wife doing as late as this? When's she coming?"

"She'll bring dinner at 12 o'clock."

The old woman shrugged her shoulders:

"At least she's not overtiring herself! . . ."

"She's like everyone else. Whether she's here or at the farm, she's at work."

"Oh! Work of that sort . . ."

Then, as if talking to herself as she continued to scrape the ground:

"Our master isn't here either this morning. Perhaps he stayed behind to give her a hand? . . ."

The man held back his scythe:

"What do you mean by that?"

"Me? . . . Nothing . . . Words . . . something to say . . ."

Jean went on with his work. The mother began again as if speaking to herself:

"My dead husband wouldn't have had it . . . When he went to the fields, I didn't stay behind to keep the master company."

A second time the reaper raised his head.

"Why are you telling me that?"

"I was thinking, inside me, that your father was more suspicious than you are . . ."

The son straightened himself with a jerk:

"What is it? What do you mean? You must have some reason for talking like this . . ."

"If you must have it then," blurted the old

woman from her stooping position, "people are gossiping about you and about Céline . . . Nasty gossip, too!"

"Who gossips?"

"No one . . . and everyone . . . What's more, you can't blame them; they can't help seeing what's under their noses."

"Lies! . . ."

Without seeming to hear him, the old woman pushed aside a clod of earth with her foot and continued:

"I'm telling you for your own good. I'm your mother, and I oughtn't to hide anything from you . . . You can be angry if you like. But you've had your warning."

"I tell you it's all lies. Céline is a good housewife, never tired of work; she has everything she wants . . . Why should she be unfaithful? Why? . . ."

The old woman made a vague gesture:

"Who can tell?"

Changing her tone she went on:

"Besides, I'm not saying she is . . . I'm only speaking for the good of both of you. She's young, she likes to amuse herself, to dress smartly to go to market on Saturdays. Temptation often takes people quickly. At the beginning they don't see any harm in it. They let someone give them a ribbon, a fichu, a comb for the hair, a watch-

chain . . . And to be able to wear them they say they were bargains, got for next to nothing . . . that they picked them up on the road. Perhaps it's true . . ."

Every one of the slow words struck into the husband's brain. He thought of his wife's return one evening after she had accompanied the master to the town. He remembered that the following Sunday she had worn a lace fichu and moiré ribbons. Above all, he saw the gold chain she said she had picked up on the road . . .

The monotonous voice of the old woman continued :

"It's not her that I'm meaning, of course ! But a husband isn't always there : he's in the fields : he goes off to do his month's military service . . ."

The man was no longer listening. His two hands crossed on his scythe, his eyes vague, he was absorbed in the recollections that crowded into his mind. All kinds of little incidents gave weight to the insinuations of the old woman : the master, a known libertine, very hard on all his workers, but always particularly amiable to him : the wife coquettish. And suddenly he remembered that in a week he would have to leave for a long month with his regiment.

A call rang out from under the big trees at the end of the field, and, looking up, Jean Madek saw the head and shoulders of his wife emerging.

from the gold of the plain, and a few steps behind her, swinging his short, thick stick among the corn, the master with his red face and big shady-brimmed hat.

And a laughing voice cried :

“Here’s the pittance !”

One by one, the workers rose out of the corn, sat down under a tree, and began to eat their dinner.

Jean was silent, slowly cutting his black bread into pieces.

“Why are you so quiet, Madek ?” asked the farmer.

“Are you ill ?” added the wife.

“No, but the sun strikes hard. It must have been better in the house ?”

The master broke into a laugh :

“You’re about right there !”

The meal finished, everyone lay down for a nap. They would start work again when the sun lost a little of its ardour. Madek did not sleep. Lying on his stomach, his chin in his hands, he was lost in thought . . .

As two o’clock struck the men got up, went back to the field, and once more over the gold of the corn, unruffled by any breeze, there sang the rhythmic sound of the scythes.

When they were all at work, the master stretched

himself slowly, and in a sleepy voice shouted to the wife of Madek :

“Come and give an eye here, Céline : have you by any chance a needle with you?”

“Yes, master.”

“Then come and put a stitch in my blouse. The cows are in the meadow. There’s plenty of time before you need fetch them. The sun has turned. It’s too hot here just now. I’m going over there under the apple-tree. Come to me when you’ve finished your sheaf. Come by the path so as not to beat down the corn.”

They smiled stealthily at each other. But Madek, who was watching, had seen. He made a movement as if to speak, then he lowered his head and went on with the reaping.

The old woman had gone. It was now his wife who followed him. When she had tied up her sheaf, he said, without turning :

“Didn’t you hear what the master said to you?”

“Yes, I did . . .”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

“I’m just going . . .”

She fastened up her hair which had come undone while she stooped : and, her two hands flat on her hips, her waist swaying under her bright petticoat, she went along the path, a cornflower between her teeth.

He watched her being swallowed up in the

verdure as one is swallowed up in the sea, and when she had quite disappeared in the shadow of the apple-tree that stood out on the horizon, he set to work again.

His movements had lost their quiet ease of the morning. He went forward in jerks, stopping sharply, then on again, his head lowered, his jaw clenched, an ugly frown on his forehead.

All the old woman had said was fermenting in him like new wine, fizzing in his temples, filling him with a sort of drunken rage. At first there had been doubt; then had followed certainty which had taken deeper root because of the incidents that had just happened.

He was advancing, and before him he seemed to see his wife and the master laughing and kissing each other in the shadow of the apple-tree.

He was advancing, throwing the weight of his whole body into his arms. Behind him the sheaves fell, and the field that his scythe devoured seemed to grow larger. Never in the earliest vigour of his manhood had he been able to work like that.

From a distance, a fellow-worker called :

“ Are you going to cut it all to-day ? ”

Without looking up, he replied :

“ Perhaps.”

When he was only a few yards away from the apple-tree, he stopped, listening intently : mur-

murs reached him. A voice, the voice of his wife, said :

“ No . . . He might be able to see us . . . ”

And another rougher one replied :

“ Keep still ! He’s at the other end of the field. It’ll be half-an-hour before he gets here. . . Come closer . . . ”

For some seconds he stood as if transfixed, livid under his sunburn, then with a sharp gesture of decision went on reaping. But he had slowed down. The sweep of the sythe was almost noiseless. The wheat fell to the earth without a sound. When he was almost under the tree he heard the sound of kisses. Pulling himself up to his fullest height, with a furious movement he lifted the scythe. Gleaming white in the sun, the blade leapt up, came down, and plunged . . . Two horrible shrieks rang out, and two frightful things, two heads, bounded up and fell again, bespattering the stalks that broke with a grating sound . . . The scythe flew up out of the corn-waves, all red . . .

Madek threw it away, and waving his bloody hands in the air, roared :

“ Help ! An accident . . . They were there ! ”

XV

THE BEGGAR

It was growing dark, and the beggar stopped at a ditch by the side of the road and looked for a corner where he could spend the night. He rolled himself up in a sack that was his nearest approach to an overcoat, placed the little packet he carried on the end of his stick under his head for a pillow, and exhausted by fatigue and hunger, sank down and watched the stars prick through the dark sky.

The road, which was bordered by woods, was deserted. The birds were asleep in the trees. Away in the distance the village made a big black patch, and a lump came into the old man's throat as he lay there in the calm and silence.

He had never known his parents. Picked up out of charity, he had been brought up on a farm, but at an early age he had taken to the ~~road~~ looking for work that would provide him with food. Life had been very hard on him. He had never known anything of it but its miseries: long winter nights spent under the shadow of mills: the shame of begging, the desire to die, to go to sleep and never

wake again. All the men he had come in contact with had been suspicious and unkind. His great trouble was that everyone seemed to fear him: children ran away when they saw him: the dogs barked at his dusty rags.

But in spite of it all he bore no one any ill-will: he had a simple, kindly nature dulled by misfortune.

He was falling asleep when horse-bells sounded in the distance. He raised his head and saw a bright light moving above the ground. He watched it without interest. He could distinguish a heavy waggon and a big horse. The load was so high and so broad it seemed to fill the road. A man walked near the horse humming a song.

Soon the song ceased. The road was uphill, and the hoofs of the horse struck and grated violently on the stones. With voice and whip the man urged the animal on:

“Gee up! . . . Up!”

It was pulling with all its strength, its neck stretched out. Twice or thrice it stopped, almost fell on its knees, got up again, and made an effort that strained its hide from shoulder to hind-quarters.

But it was winded, and the waggon stopped.

The waggoner, his shoulder against the wheel, his hands on the spokes, cried still louder:

“Up! Gee up . . . up there! . . .”

In vain the horse strained all its muscles: the cart did not move.

“Up there! Up . . .”

Its feet apart, its nostrils throbbing, the animal stood still, trembling with the strain of keeping the front of its hoofs in the soil so that it should not be dragged back by the enormous load. As he bent over the wheel, the waggoner caught sight of the beggar sitting on the edge of the ditch, and hailed him:

“A hand, comrade! The brute won’t go any further. Come and help to give a push.”

The beggar got up, and pushing with all his feeble strength, cried with the other:

“Up, up! . . .”

It was useless.

Quickly exhausted and full of pity, the beggar said:

“Let him get his breath. It’s too heavy for him.”

“Not a bit of it. He’s a cowardly brute. If I give in to him now, he’ll never pull another load up a hill. Up there! Gee up! . . . Get a stone to wedge up the wheel. We’ll make him go across the road to get a move on . . .”

The beggar brought a big stone.

“Like this,” said the waggoner. “I’ll stay at the wheel. Here’s the whip. Take the bit, head

to the left, and lash his legs as hard as you can. That'll bring him to."

Stung by pain, the horse made a big effort. The stones ground and flashed under his feet.

"That's it! That's it!"

But as the horse strained to one side, the waggoner, bending to push the stone under the wheel, slipped. The horse was drawn back. The man gave a cry and fell.

He was on his back, his face convulsed, his eyes wild, his two elbows digging into the soil, his strong hands clutching the rim of the wheel as he tried to stop it passing over his chest.

In a voice of agony he shouted :

"Pull him forward! Pull him forward! He's crushing me . . ."

Guessing, without seeing, what had happened, the beggar belaboured the horse with both lash and handle. But the unwilling animal sank on its knees, rolled on its side, and the cart tilted forward, the shafts on the ground : the lantern upset and went out, and nothing could be heard in the darkness of the night but the sharp breathing of the horse and the stifled moan of the man :

"Go forward . . . go forward . . ."

Unable to get the animal up, the beggar rushed to the waggoner, trying to free him. But he was firmly held by the wheel.

By a prodigious effort he was managing to keep

it an inch or two from his body : a slip, a loss of strength, and it would mean being crushed to death . . . He himself understood this so clearly that when he saw the beggar bending over him, he yelled :

“Don’t touch ! Don’t touch . . . run to the village . . . quick . . . to my father’s house . . . the Luchats . . . the first farm to the right . . . tell them to bring . . . help . . . I can keep like this for ten minutes . . . quick . . .”

The beggar ran up the hill at full speed. He rushed into the village which lay straight in front of him. All the shutters were closed, there were no lights : not a soul to be seen anywhere. Dogs barked furiously as he passed, but he heard nothing, saw nothing, his mind concentrated on the awful vision of the man who was lying at the bottom of the hill holding off the great weight that was sinking down on him :

At last he stopped. Before him the road stretched out on the level. At his right a building stood behind a courtyard. A shaft of light came from the window. This must be the house. He hammered on the shutters with his fists.

A voice asked :

“Is that you, Jules ?”

Completely out of breath because of the pace he had come at, he had no voice to reply : he could only keep on knocking. He had heard the

creaking of a bed, steps on the boards. The window opened, and the head of a sleepy man appeared in the square of light :

“Is that you, Jules?”

He had recovered enough voice to pant :

“No, but I have come to . . .”

The farmer did not let him finish.

“What the devil are you doing here! Waking people at this hour of the night!”

He shut the window with a bang, muttering :

“A dirty tramp . . . A good-for-nothing . . .”

Stupified by the brutality of the voice and action, the beggar stood transfixed. He thought :

“What did they think I wanted? What harm was I doing . . . I suppose I did disturb their sleep . . . If they only knew, poor things.”

He knocked timidly on the shutter again.

From inside the voice cried :

“Still there! . . . Wait a bit! You’ll be sorry if I get up to you.”

He had got his breath again, and with it came courage. He cried :

“Open the window . . .”

“Go ~~about~~ your business . . .”

“Open the window! . . .”

This time the window opened, and so quickly he had to jump on one side to get out of the way of the shutter. The farmer stood there, furious, a gun in his hand.

“Do you hear what I say, you starveling? If you don’t clear out quickly, it’s an ounce of lead you’ll get.”

The hard voice of a woman called from the bed :

“Fire at him . . . a good riddance for everybody if you do ! They’re no good for anything but thieving, those tramps . . . and worse than thieving . . .”

Frightened by the gun that was pointed at him, the beggar had retreated into the darkness. He trembled, and for a moment forgot the poor wretch who was perhaps at that very moment dying on the road. For the first time a bitter anger rose in him. Never before had he felt so despised and rejected.

Suppose he had been starving, suppose he had knocked to beg for shelter? Had he not a right to a litter of straw near the cattle? To a crust of bread with the dogs? . . . Apparently his rags did not cover even a human being, seeing that the rich could threaten to kill him . . . A sort of fury ran through him.

His first impulse was to raise his stick and beat upon the shutter, then he reflected :

“If I knock again, he will fire . . . If I call, it will rouse the village, and they will have knocked me senseless before I can explain what I want . . . If I go somewhere else for help, it will be just the same . . .”

After a moment of hesitation, he set off at a gallop to go back and try to save unaided the comrade of a few minutes. He ran wildly, urged forward by the fear of what might have happened while he was away . . . What would he see when he got there . . .

This terror lent him the strength of the legs of a young man, and he was soon back near the place where the wagon had stopped. He cried :

“Comrade !”

No reply. He called again :

“Comrade !”

The darkness was so dense he could not find the horse. But he heard a neighing and went forward. The animal, still on its side, was lying a few steps from him, the waggon tilted forwards.

“Comrade ! Comrade !”

He bent down, and as the moon came out from behind a cloud, he saw the man with his arms spread out like a cross, his eyes shut, blood coming from his mouth. The wheel, which seemed enormous, was buried in his chest as in a rut.

Unable to do anything more for the poor mutilated creature, his anger against the parents blazed up more fiercely than before. A desire for revenge gripped him : he ran back to the farm, and this time he had no fear of the gun, no feeling but one of savage joy as he beat on the shutters.

“Is that you, Jules ?”

He made no reply. When the window opened and he saw the farmer's face and again heard the question, he replied :

"No ! It's the starveling who came here before to tell you your son lay dying on the road."

The terrified voice of the mother mingled with that of the father :

"What does he say ? . . . What does he say ? Come in . . . quick, quick . . ."

But he pulled his hat down over his eyes, and walked away as he answered :

• "I've something else to do now . . . There's no need to be in such a hurry. You are too late. It was when I came before that you ought to have made haste. He's got the whole load of hay on his ribs now."

• "Quick, quick, father !" sobbed the woman.
• "Run ! Run !"

As he threw on some clothes, the father shouted :

"Where is he ? . . . Listen . . . Come back . . . For the love of God, tell . . ."

But the beggar, his stick on his shoulder, was lost in the darkness.

And the only reply was the call of a cock that had been awakened by the voices and crowed from a dunghill, and the howling of the dog that raised its head and bayed at the moon.

XVI

UNDER CHLOROFORM

"As for me," declared pretty young Madame Chaligny, "if ever I were obliged to have an operation and it was absolutely necessary to give me an anaesthetic, I would not place myself in the hands of any doctor I didn't know personally . . . When I come to think of it, it seems to me that it would be ideal to be chloroformed by a man who was in love with you."

At this, the old doctor who had been sitting listening in silence, probably because they were speaking of his profession, shook his head.

"No, Madame, no . You are quite wrong there. That is the very last man you ought to choose."

"Why? With a man who loved her a woman would feel completely at ease; her thoughts would be concentrated on him, and she would not run the risk of having her mind distracted in a way that might prove dangerous at such a moment. There must be even a sort of rare voluptuousness in sinking into unconsciousness with beloved eyes gazing into yours . . . Then, think of the enchantment of coming to . . . of the return to consciousness . . ."

"Don't make any mistake about that 'return,'" smiled the doctor. "There's ~~very~~ little poetry about it. The sick person emerges painfully from the heaviest of all intoxications, and at such a moment, the prettiest woman in the world lacks charm and runs the risk of disenchanting the most ardent lover."

After a little silence, he added gravely:

"She runs a still more terrible risk—that of never returning at all."

As everyone protested, he went on:

"I will tell you a story to illustrate what I mean, an old and very sad story. I am the tragic hero of it, and if I am able to speak of it to-day, it is because the telling can no longer compromise anyone. I am the only one left of those who played part in it, and you will lose your time if you try and discover the names of people who are now in their graves. I am seventy years old; I was twenty-four then, so you see . . .

"I was house-surgeon at a hospital when I first met the woman who was the great and only Love of my life. I would have done the maddest things to be able to see her; to keep her happy, out of reach of any trouble, I was capable of making any and every sacrifice; I would have killed myself without regret rather than have a breath of suspicion touch her.

"We were very young. They had married her

to a man twenty years older than herself, and I can say with truth, though the words sound strange from the mouth of an old man, that she loved me as much as I loved her.

“We had found complete happiness in each other for some months, discreetly, and without causing the slightest remark, when one morning I received a hasty line from the husband begging me to come and see his wife, who was ill. I rushed to the house. I found her in bed, very pale, with the anxious face, blue-circled eyes, pinched nose and lifeless hair I had so often seen at the hospital. The night before she had been seized with violent pains in the side; they had put her to bed, and since then she had lain there moaning, hiccoughing between her sobs, warding off with terrified gestures any hand that approached her, her appealing eyes begging no one to touch her.

“There was not an hour, not a minute to lose. We sent for my Chief, and it was decided to operate there and then.

“You must have been through it to understand the difference between calmly preparing to operate on a person you don't know, and the horror of doing it for some one very dear to you.

“While they were getting the next room ready for the operation, my poor little darling beckoned to me, and trying to keep the pain out of her voice whispered :

"I'm not afraid . . . Don't worry about me . . . You will put me to sleep, won't you? . . .

"I protested with a gesture, but she persisted.
 " "I beg you to do it . . . You must . . . No one but you . . ."

"I had neither the time nor the strength to say 'no.' They came and carried her away . . .

"Then began my Calvary.

"While my Chief and the other doctors and nurses moved about the room, I took the bottle of chloroform and the compress.

"She started back as she inhaled the first few drops, then smiled at me and gave herself up without further resistance. But she did not go off properly. Perhaps it was that, too moved to measure it carefully, I gave too little chloroform, letting too much air pass between the handkerchief and her lips. Also I could not help thinking of all the accidents that might happen, of the cases of syncope I had seen or heard of, and it was not astonishing that my eyes were not as sharp as usual, my fingers uncertain

"My Chief, his sleeves turned up, his streaming hands stretched out, came up:

" 'Has she gone off?'

"The sound of his voice braced me. It took my mind to the hospital, and I pulled myself together as I replied:

" 'No, sir, not yet.'

“ ‘Hurry . . .’ ”

“ I bent over her, asking :

“ ‘Can you hear me . . .’ ”

“ She opened her eyes and lowered the lids twice to say ‘yes’.

“ ‘Is there a buzzing in your ears? . . . What can you hear?’ ”

“ She murmured :

“ ‘Bells . . .’ ”

As she spoke, she seemed to shrink a little. One of her arms fell inert on the table; her breathing grew even, her face paler, and little blue veins appeared at the sides of the nose. I bent over her; her breath was sibilant, heavy with the smell of the chloroform; she was asleep.

“ ‘You can begin now, sir,’ I said to my Chief.

“ But when I saw the knife move along the white body, leaving behind it a red line, my agitation returned. As I watched them cut and pinch her flesh, it seemed to me that they were cutting and pinching my own. My hand stole up mechanically and stroked her face. Suddenly her legs moved with an instinctive gesture of defence, and she moaned.

“ My Chief straightened himself :

“ ‘But you haven’t got her under.’ ”

“ I poured some drops of chloroform on the compress; they made a large grey stain on the fine batiste.

"The operator bent over her again.

"But again she moaned and began to mutter incoherent syllables.

"How I longed for it all to be over; longed to see her come to herself, to have done with the awful nightmare. She was now motionless, but she continued to moan and mutter, and suddenly among the murmurings she pronounced distinctly a name, mine: Jean.

"A shudder ran through me. Speaking as in a dream, she went on:

" 'Don't worry . . . I'm not afraid . . . '

"Great God, it was I who was afraid!

"Not so much afraid that she would never come to, that she would die in my arms, but afraid that in her delirium she would betray our secret.

"She began to stammer words that increased my fear. Hardly knowing what I was doing, I said:

" 'Sir, she is not completely under . . . '

" 'Because she chatters? . . . What does that matter so long as she doesn't move? . . . '

"At that moment her voice rose clearly, every word distinct:

" 'I'm not afraid . . . you are with me . . . You put me to sleep . . . '

"There was no knowing what she might say next, and terrified, I administered more chloroform . . . four, five times, tilt on tilt, I poured

it on the compress and held it to her face . . . Her voice, now uneven, came to me muffled by the handkerchief I held against her mouth.

“ ‘I am asleep . . . I can hear the bells . . . When I am well again we will go for walks together like we used to . . .’

“I lost my head. I thought that her husband who was in the next room, and probably near the door, would hear, that the others would understand. She, so proud, she whom no scandal had ever touched, who till then had been above all suspicion, would be dishonoured.

“To get her quite under, to try to keep her silent, I tilted the bottle, I tilted it again. The compress became heavy in my hand.

“ ‘We shall be together . . . at night,’ chanted the voice. ‘You will take me in your arms again . . . you will . . .’

“I lost my reason—what would the next words be? I poured . . . I poured . . . I no longer knew what I was doing.

“Then came the moment when I found that the bottle was empty. I realized that I had given too much. Terrified, I flung the compress away; with a hasty finger I lifted one of her eyelids and saw that the pupil of the eye was fixed, dilated so that there was nothing left of the iris but a transparent ring. I wanted to shout; ‘Stop! . . .’

"The words were strangled by the contraction in my throat.

"At the same moment I heard the voice of my Chief, short and anxious.

"'What's this . . . What . . . the blood-pressure is very low!'

"With a violent movement he pushed me away.

"'But she's not breathing . . . Some oxygen . . . some ether . . . quick . . .'

"Alas! Too late.

"Her poor head rolled lifeless; her blue eye, the eyelid still up, was glazed and looked at me with an empty stare . . .

"We tried everything, but nothing was any good. Syncope, the horrible white syncope, as we call it, had taken her from me."

For a few minutes he sat lost in thought, then went on:

"I know perfectly well that such accidents happen frequently; that no one is safe from the treachery of chloroform. But I also know that if I had not loved her and had done my work with cold indifference; if I had not been overwhelmed by the double anguish of holding her life in my hands and hearing her unconsciously betraying the secret that would ruin her, I should not have to reproach myself with causing her death . . ."

He was silent. A wave of sadness passed

through the room as if it had been carried in on the chilly autumn wind that blew against the damp window.

Madame Chaligny, her head on the back of her armchair, sat gazing into space like a person lost in a dream.

The party broke up early that night.

XVII

THE MAN WHO LAY ASLEEP

Worn out with fatigue, half dead with hunger, Ferrou got to the gates of Paris as night was falling. For eight days he had dragged himself from village to village, getting strength from the desire to see once again, now he was out of prison, the great city with its broad streets and the narrow roads which Night suddenly peoples with moving and silent forms. For five years he had thought of nothing but this return, storing up hate and a desire for murder strong enough to make his first action the purchase of a knife that he had sharpened in the dark on the stone edge of a well. As he walked along, his fingers were constantly on the handle.

Lights were appearing in the windows of some houses that stood in their own gardens. One of these remained dark, and but for the smoke that rose from a chimney, it might have been empty. The rare passers-by hurried along: here and there in the distance street-lamps flickered. It was quite dark now; a cold, dreary winter's night. Ferrou stood still: push on to Paris? he had not

the strength : sleep where he was, in the cutting wind, with no covering but his rags? impossible. He had left behind him the country stables where the straw makes a warm bed for vagabonds ; there were no more village inns . . . and even if there were? . . . he had not a halfpenny in his pocket. For the second time, the little house without lights attracted his attention. He was alone, he was cold, he was hungry, this shelter was as good as any other' . . . He walked through the garden, listened, drew back a window-shutter ; as it happened, the window was unfastened. He opened it, and at a bound was in the house. The window shut, he felt about in the dark, touching a bed, a small table. The drapery of a hanging wardrobe gave way to his hand ; he raised it, felt the clothes beneath it, and let it fall again. Then he found a door, opened it, and a savoury smell of cooking tempted his nostrils.

"No good," he thought, "there's someone in the house. I must clear out . . ."

He turned to go, then stopped. Go where? To die of hunger on the road? If anyone came in, he could hide. Then, his thoughts running off into another channel, he said to himself :

"You are cold, and it is warm here : you are hungry, and hot food will soon be ready : you have no money, and there is sure to be a full stocking hidden somewhere. You will probably have time

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to do all you want before anyone disturbs you, and if you are disturbed . . . ”

He opened his knife, tried the point on the palm of his hand, the edge on his nail, and murmuring : “ The first who tries to stop me ! . . . ” went into the kitchen, lifted the lid of the pan, pricked the meat, and sneered :

“ Not cooked enough, I will come back . . . ”

But as he turned away, there was a sound of steps outside. He heard the latch of the garden-gate lifted, the crunching of the gravel, and quickly, just as the key turned in the door, he slipped into the other room, raised the wardrobe-hanging and crouched down among the clothes. Not too soon : a man was coming into the house. This man lit a lamp, threw his coat over a chair, and began to pace the room. From his hiding-place, Ferrou saw him coming and going. He was a big man with large hands and square shoulders : his heavy measured steps gave an impression of strength.

“ The devil ! ” thought Ferrou, “ It’s not when the stomach has been empty for a week that a man is in a state to attack a lump like that ! ”

The man sat down, and seemed to be thinking deeply, his head resting on his hands. The bell sounded, and he rose, saying :

“ Is it you, Marie ? ”

“ Yes. I went to bring the boy home from .

school. He hadn't taken his waterproof, and it's snowing."

The man took the child on his knee, stroking his hair. From the kitchen came the voice of a woman :

"I didn't hurry. You are earlier than usual, it's only half-past six. You didn't find your friends at the café?"

"Yes. But we had special work this afternoon, and to-night I must go out."

"Well, everything's ready. We can begin at once."

"Go on without me, I'm not hungry. I will lie down on my bed. Wake me at eleven o'clock."

"All right. Come, little one, supper's ready. Let your father rest, he's tired."

The child went out of the room, and the man stretched himself on the bed.

"It's half-past six," thought Ferrou, "and he doesn't clear out till eleven. Five hours of this!"

Through the half-open door came the clatter of plates and the sound of the two voices. Now and again, Ferrou was tempted to leave his hiding-place, to spring on the sleeping man, to stab him; but imagining the unequal struggle, the noise, the too-long and dangerous massacre of three beings, the woman and child clinging to his arm like cats, paralysing his movements, he decided to wait. Once the man had gone, it would be easy to settle

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the woman and child. He had abandoned all idea of a quiet robbery. His stomach was too empty, and his heart too full of hate to be satisfied with so little. His weakness made him ferocious: he had a knife, and it was there to be used.

When the meal was finished, the woman put the child to bed and washed up the crockery. In the silence that followed, nothing could be heard but the tic-tac of the clock, and the irregular breathing of the sleeper who turned and tossed on his bed. It struck ten; he arranged his plan of attack. In an hour the man would go . . . Afterwards, he would be master of the place.

The thought of the coming massacre gave him more joy than the hope of the plunder. All was quiet. The man and the woman, the one sleeping, the other reading, had no suspicion that in the shadow a man lay in wait. Gradually a drowsiness stole over him, and he started when a voice said:

“It is eleven.”

He rubbed his eyes and slowly stretched himself. The man got up, put on his shoes and thrust his arms through the sleeves of his coat.

“Above all, don’t catch cold,” said the woman. “I have heated some coffee: will you have it?”

“Yes.”

While he was sipping it, the woman went on:

“Won’t you put on your overcoat?”

Ferrou felt that she was stretching her hand to-

wards the hangings, and started. But when the man replied: "No, this one will do very well," he breathed again, and still shaking with fright, thought:

"You, you hell cat, you shall pay for that presently! . . ."

She went on:

"You haven't forgotten anything? What time will you be back?"

"About seven or eight o'clock as usual."

He was ready. Standing up, the collar of his overcoat buttoned up, he seemed bigger and stronger than before. Behind his curtain, Ferrou was growing unnerved: "You are never going then! . . ." The man, his hand on the handle of the door, turned back.

"Don't forget to fasten the bars of the shutters and bolt the door."

A sound of wheels grated on the road and stopped.

"Here they are," said the man.

He went out into the garden and began to talk to the new-comers.

"You haven't forgotten anything?—Yes—The coach-house properly shut?—Yes, yes.—Let's be off then! Go in, Marie; it's snowing, it's a very bad night."

"Worse than you think!" snarled Ferrou.

His knife was burning his fingers; he longed to

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have done with it all. But the man still lingered. His voice rang clear through the cold air :

“ Pass me the lantern. Let me see if everything is in its place.”

Suddenly his voice, till then very kind, rose angrily :

“ Just look how you have fastened that ! The sheath is not even buckled ! And it is badly balanced ! In less than a quarter of an hour half the blade would be on the ground. You'd have mud in the slides and on the posts. Come, give me a hand !”

Ferrou listened, mocking :

“ The finest porcelain, at least, to need so much care.”

The man went on :

“ What have you been thinking about ? At the first jolt the tub would have tipped off.”

Ferrou ceased sneering. A cold shiver ran down his back. The Blade . . . the Posts . . . the Tub . . . Separately, these words meant nothing . . . Put together . . . they suggested, might mean, a terrible thing . . . Where was he ? Who was this man who had been sleeping there and was now saying these words to the other man ?

The voice softened :

“ There, that will do. It would have been a fine thing if you had blunted the knife of the guillotine.”

Trembling, Ferrou repeated : " The knife of the guillotine ! . . ." and his teeth began to chatter. These last words had brought before him in a flash the whole of the awful thing. He seemed to hear the mysterious noises that come in the night to wake those who are condemned to death, the hammer-knocks of the sinister carpenter : he seemed to see the pale faces of the assistants who enter the cell : the big red posts set up outside in the grey dawn of the morning . . .

" Ready !" said a voice . . . the voice of the man.

Then Ferrou, gasping with fear, biting his fingers to stop himself from shrieking, stammered, forgetting that he might be heard :

" It is the executioner ! I have been watching the executioner sleep !"

The cart had set off at a good pace, and the woman was just going to shut the door, but, flinging away his knife, forgetting that he had crouched there for hours waiting to kill, he knocked her over with a thrust of his shoulder, rushed into the garden, leapt over the fence, and began to run blindly down the road, fleeing from Paris, whose distant noises and familiar odours would soon be augmented by the sound of cracking bone and crushed flesh, and the fusty smell of blood.

XVIII

FASCINATION

One hour ago I was a prisoner. And what a prisoner! It was not a question of my honour or my liberty: it was my head that was at stake.

I have known terrible nights haunted by the night-mare of the guillotine. I have trembled as some ghastly fascination made me lift my clammy hands to my neck to trace the narrow line the knife would make there. I have shuddered at the hostile murmurs of the crowd. The hoarse roar: "To the scaffold with him!" has rung and echoed in my ears.

But that is all over now. I am free. Once again I have seen the noisy streets and the bright lights of the shops. Presently, quite at ease, I shall dine. Sitting by the fire I shall smoke my pipe, and to-night I shall fall asleep quietly in the warm bed that is waiting for me.

And yet never have I felt myself so much of a criminal as at this moment just after my judges have acquitted me. I am wondering what aberration prevented them from knowing the kind of being I really am. The power of systematic denial

stupidifies me, and I feel that if I am to regain my clearness of mind, I must write down the truth. I have hidden for the last three months with a cleverness and cynicism that have ended by almost making me believe my own lies.

For I really am a murderer : I killed a woman.

Why ? . . . I do not know. I have never been able to understand why I did it.

Certainly not because of jealousy : I did not love her. Not to rob her. I am rich : and the few francs they found on her could never have tempted me. Nor was it done in anger . . .

We were in this room. She was standing near that mirror ; I was sitting just where I am at this moment. I was reading. She said to me :

“ Let’s go out . . . Let’s go for a stroll in the Bois — ”

Without raising my eyes, I replied :

“ No, I’m tired. Let’s stay here.”

She insisted. I persisted in my refusal. She kept on insisting, and her voice aggravated me. She spoke very angrily, sneering at my inertia, laughing scornfully, shrugging her shoulders. Several times I tried to stop her.

“ Will you be quiet ? . . . I beg you to be quiet . . . ”

She continued. I got up and began to pace the room, and as I walked up and down I saw on the mantelshelf a little revolver that I used to carry

in my pocket at night. I took it up mechanically. The moment I touched it, an extraordinary frame of mind took possession of me. The voice of my mistress, which had till then merely aggravated me, unnerved me to an extent I cannot describe. It was not what she was saying that irritated me, it was her voice, just her voice. If she had been gibbering meaningless words or reciting beautiful poetry, I should have felt just the same exasperation. An irresistible longing for quiet, for complete repose, seized me. How, why did my mind connect this imperious desire for the silence I could not command with the revolver I held in my hand? . . . I only know that I imagined myself brandishing the weapon, pressing the trigger, and I also saw the woman fall, without a cry . . .

As a rule, such ideas are only giddy hallucinations that flash through the brain and are gone as quickly as they come. But this time it seemed as if this particular vision had caught into my mind in the way a jagged finger-nail will catch in floss silk, getting more securely tangled as one tries to free it. I placed the revolver on the table. I could not help looking at it. I tried to turn my head away; my eyes drew me towards it.

It lay there before me, a little lifeless thing, with its ivory butt and shining barrel. Twice, thrice, I stretched out, then drew back my hand.

The desire was stronger than my will. I was obliged to touch it, to seize it.

It is impossible to understand the temptation that assails one in the face of certain kinds of danger. I remember that one day when I was in the park of the Buttes Chaumont, I was obliged to hold on to the parapet of the place they call "The Suicide's Bridge" to prevent myself from leaping off into space. Several times when I have been alone in a railway carriage, I have felt a sick longing to pull the alarm-signal. The nickel knob drew me, seemed to beg to be pulled. It was in vain I told myself that such an action would be absurd, that I should be heavily fined or punished for doing it; had not the chance stoppage of the train or the flashing by of another diverted my thoughts, I am certain I should have succumbed to the temptation.

Well, at that moment I was overwhelmed by the same irresistible impulse. My eyes and my hands ceased to obey my will. I seemed to be watching myself as if I were someone else, to be following the movements of that other person without knowing what they were leading up to.

Was she still talking? . . . Was she silent? I do not know. The only thing I am certain of is that I walked towards her with the revolver in my hand, that my wrist rose, and when it was on a level with her forehead, I pressed the trigger.

There was a sharp noise like the crack of a whip. I saw a red mark, very small, under the right lid, and the woman fell, inert, like a petticoat that has been unfastened and slips down on the carpet.

Then, instantly, my reason came back to me. A wild terror dominated me. I rushed about the room like a madman, without even thinking of looking at my victim, and some base instinct of cowardice forced me to open the door and run down the staircase, shouting :

“ Help ! . . . She has killed herself ! . . . ”

At first everyone believed it was suicide. Later the experts found that very improbable. I was arrested. The trial was a long one. I could have explained everything in a few words. I need only have said :

“ This is how it happened. ”

I persisted in obstinate denial. And as, sooner ~~or~~ later, they always find some motive to account for a criminal action, I was eventually acquitted.

Reviewing it all calmly now, I am wondering if I were wrong to go on lying. If I had told the jury what I am writing now, would they have believed me ? Would they have absolved me from blame ? I believe I was right to deny it. Imperfectly understood, certain truths can very easily seem like lies . . .

My God, how good it is to be free, to be able to come and go as I like. .

From my window I see the street, the houses and the trees . . . It was here on this very spot the thing happened. They did not want to give me this room. I insisted on having it. I am not afraid of ghosts. Besides, I can write this better here than I should have elsewhere. One can visualize a past incident so much more realistically in the place where it happened.

Somehow this confession has completely relieved my mind. My soul seems clean once again, as if it had been washed.

I shall try to forget the nightmare, it has all been. I will go and live in the country somewhere far away from Paris. Soon everyone will have forgotten even my name. I shall be another man, living another existence, with the ways and habits of a peasant . . . I shall cease to recognize myself.

There is one thing above all that I want to get rid of: the revolver they gave back to me in the court this morning. It reminds me too forcibly of things I must forget. If I need a weapon, I will buy another.

It is close beside me as I write, and the sight of it hurts me. Yet what a little thing it is . . . It is pretty . . . It looks like a toy, a charming ornament . . . incapable of doing any harm.

I have just taken it in my hand. It is very light, very smooth to the touch. It is also very cold . .

It frightens me a little . . . It is mysterious, this sleeping weapon . . . The danger of a knife is apparent; you see the sharp blade, can feel the pointed end . . . Here, nothing: you must have used it to . . . I will not keep it . . . I will sell it at once, to-morrow . . . Sell it? . . . I will give it away . . . No, I will not. I will throw it away . . .

Yet after all, why should I? So long as I don't see it for some time. I am looking at it too much . . . It is natural enough, too . . . It lies there like a silent witness . . . Decidedly I do not like it. I will get rid of it instantly.

I keep on writing and the revolver is still before me.

People who commit suicide must sit just like this writing their last wishes. I wonder what their sensations are . . . I believe I know exactly. At first they dare not look at the revolver . . . then once their resolution has been made, they probably cannot take their eyes from it, sit looking at it, fascinated . . .

Does it really need so much courage for a man to kill himself?

The worst part must be the simple act of stretching out the hand, grasping the weapon, and feeling its chill . . .

But no, I am holding it in my left hand . . . place the barrel against my temple . . . der:

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sensation is not at all disagreeable. A little shiver . . . then the steel grows warm against your flesh . . .

No, that can not be the most horrible moment . . . it must be the second when one presses the trigger . . . the last order the soul gives the body . . .

Who knows? . . . Perhaps even that is nothing . . . Once the glamour has got hold of you, you feel irresistibly drawn on.

I understand that perfectly . . .

. . . You almost feel as if you no longer exist . . .

. . . You are no longer conscious of any sensation . . .

. . . The Unknown calls you . . .

. . . draws you . . . envelops you . . .

. . . And you press the trigg . . .

very

XIX

THE BASTARD

Seated on his stool, an elbow on the table, the man ate his supper slowly, a long interval between every spoonful of soup. The woman was standing by the big open hearth, now and again pushing the blazing twigs into place with her sabot. She talked incessantly, paying no attention to the obstinate silence with which her remarks were received.

"Is it true that the Chaputs have got rid of their old hens? That the Rizoy's butter has turned?"

Without raising his head, he murmured:

"I don't know."

"And you—what sort of prices did you get?"

"Bah!"

"Why are you so short to-night? What's the matter with you?"

He put his spoon down. His arms stretched out before him, his two fists on the table, he drew a deep breath as if he were on the point of lifting a heavy sack.

"The matter . . . the matter . . ."

He stopped, drew back the plate he had pushed away, cut himself a piece of bread, shut his knife, and drying his mouth with the back of his hand, said :

“ Nothing.”

She insisted :

“ You’re put out about something . . .”

For a time there was silence, broken only by the sound of the rain and the wind outside. The fire blazed cheerfully, throwing big lights and shadows on the walls.

Presently the woman said :

“ Have you finished your soup ? Would you like anything else ?”

He shook his head, and his “ no ” was short and sharp. Ignoring his tone, she began to talk again, telling him the gossip of the village, dwelling on details in the way one would if a man had been absent for a long time and wanted to hear about everyone and everything.

“ Do you know about the Heurtot’s dog ? The big brown dog ? They say it’s gone mad. While they were getting a gun to shoot it, it ran away and no one knows where it is.”

The man whistled between his teeth. She burst out :

“ Is that all you’ve got to say ? I don’t know what’s the matter with you to-night . . . Been to the ~~man~~, I suppose . . . though usually when

you've been there you come home in a good temper, ready to talk. To-night not a word: you've eaten your food as if it was poison, and you haven't even asked where the boy is."

He turned slowly towards her, and looking straight in her eyes, asked :

"Is it long since you saw Big Jacquet?"

She was raising her leg to push back a log that had rolled too far forward; the abrupt question seemed to transfix her, and she stood with her foot in the air as she stammered :

"Big Jacquet? . . . Not for a long time . . . Why?"

"I thought he came here to-day . . ."

"He didn't."

"What are you lying for? The postman told me he saw him come out of here this morning."

She tried to retract :

"That's right . . . he looked in for a moment as he passed . . . I'd forgotten . . . Why should I remember such a small thing? . . ."

She shrugged her shoulders and turned away. But the man wanted to talk now.

"Stay where you are," he said roughly. "I have something to say to you."

She tried to turn it off, but she had grown very pale, and her voice was uncertain :

"What are you looking at me like that for?"

He placed his hand heavily on her shoulder :

"Sit down. This has lasted long enough. It's got to be settled sooner or later . . . I'm tired of being the laughing-stock of the village . . . with them all talking about it even when I'm there. God knows I've tried not to believe it . . . but I've had too much of it. I want to know the truth: Big Jacquet is your lover."

She started violently.

"How have you the face to say such a thing! . . ."

"It's not words I want. I want proofs. I know now, you see, I know."

He repeated the "I know! I know!" several times, emphasising the words by striking his chest heavily at each repetition. Now that he had made the accusation, his anger blazed out. He banged his big hands on the table, shouting imprecations and threats. The woman was trembling, too terrified by this unchained fury to attempt to defend herself with any conviction.

"You thought it would go on like this always, that I was too stupid ever to find out. You'll see whether I'm stupid or not. And that's not all. Whose child is he, the boy? Which of us is his father?"

She snatched up her apron and hid her face in it, sobbing:

"How can you talk like that . . . how can you . . ."

He seized her wrists; his eyes were blood-shot, and it was through clenched teeth that he hissed :

“Which of us is his father? Which of us is his father?”

“How could it be anyone but you?” she gasped between her sobs. “You know it as well as I do.”

In spite of himself, he was moved by her words, by her tears, and his voice softened a little.

“I know nothing about it . . . Nothing at all . . . Answer”

Though she was nearly frightened out of her wits, she saw that her husband was weakening, and feeling she was getting the upper hand, she raised her voice :

“For your sake as well as mine, I refuse to take any notice of such a question.”

But anger had mastered him again. The accumulated wrath of months had only subsided for a moment to burst forth with renewed violence. His voice was little more than a hoarse whisper as he said, his arm raised threateningly :

“Listen . . . You will tell me the truth or—take care! There’ll be murder in this house. I want to know who the father of that child is . . . We’ll settle about you and me afterwards . . . But I’ll know about the child now. Do you hear—at once! Do you think I am going on bringing up another man’s bastard, breaking my back in the sun and rain to leave him a few acres of land?

Do you hear? Do you understand? There'll be murder in this house, I tell you. You and him and the village between you all, you'll end by driving me mad. I'm done with it! . . . It's got to stop . . . You'd nothing but the chemise you stood in when I married you, and long before that they used to see you lying about behind the mills with Jacquet . . . When the child was born eight months to the day after the wedding, you told me it was the fright you got when the cow went astray. I believed you . . . but I know better now. They've taken care to open my eyes. He isn't mine, that child. If he is, swear it! Then I shall know what to do. Swear—swear before God."

Her face was hidden in her hands; her teeth were chattering. She made no reply.

"You whor——"

At this moment the door opened, and the child came in, his sabots covered with mud, the hood of his cape over his head. The threatening attitude and loud voice alarmed him. The man did not finish the word. His arm fell, and his voice faltered as he pushed his wife from him, ordering:

"Go to bed."

Then he turned to the boy, trying to soften his voice as he said:

"You stay here."

The frightened child took off his cloak, placed his sabots in a corner near the door, and stood motionless.

The man went to a stool near the fire, where he sat for some time lost in thought, his elbows on his knees. Presently he raised his head and beckoned to the boy.

“Come here . . .”

He drew him between his knees, and taking the small head in his hands, looked intently at his face in the light of the lamp. He stared with desperate intensity, every nerve strained in the effort to see whom the child resembled. A wave of tenderness rushed through him at the contact with the frightened little creature. He felt he would rather never see the child again than find in him any resemblance to the Other. But some influence he could not control riveted his eyes to the face, fastened his fingers in the hair, pressed his knees tightly against the slim form . . . Neither could he master a feeling of hate that burned deep down in his heart. At first he hesitated, but desire for the truth proved irresistible. The eyes, the small eyes deeply set in their sockets, they were the eyes of the Other . . . The mouth that seemed to be always smiling . . . his mouth; the front teeth with the spaces between them, above all, the hair, the dry, stiff hair that stood up in ruddy disorder . . . all, everything, down to the smallest

detail . . . Nothing was lacking. God in Heaven! . . . It was true then. She had deceived him, the whore! She had foisted her lover's child on him.

The evidence was there, shrieking at him . . . No need for further proof . . . the living one stood before him . . . But he still struggled against certainty, fighting with himself, not wanting to believe, trying to reason away conviction .

He loved this child he had believed his own; he had watched it grow up out of babyhood, it called him "father," and he was never so happy as when it was running beside him in the fields . . . Could anyone feel like that towards the child of another man? . . . Surely there was something unique in the feeling a man has for his own flesh and blood, a tenderness he could never have for the child of another man? . . . The eyes, the hair, the teeth, the mouth might seem the same—but was he not imagining it?

. . . A noise like a moan broke the silence. He listened . . . It sounded again. . . then there came a sort of scratching outside the door, a growl. He pushed the child away, and the boy sat down by the fire and began to play with the twigs. He went to the window, opened it, peered out, and shut it again quickly .

He had seen a large dark mass crouching across the threshold. He knew all the dogs in the village,

and by the pointed nose and eyes that glittered in the shadow, he had recognised the Heurtot's dog.

He took his gun from the corner, put two cartridges in it, and was on the point of opening the window to fire when it occurred to him that the noise would frighten the child. He placed the gun on the table, saying :

“Go and find your mother and tell her not to be frightened. I am going to fire at the Heurtot's dog.”

The child turned towards him. Kneeling before the fire, he was in the full light, and as he made a quick movement, his likeness to Big Jacquet was striking . . . terrifying . . .

The man's anger blazed up again ; he bent down, and was drawing the boy towards him when suddenly an oath strangled in his throat.

There, near to the cheek, almost at the corner of the mouth, was a light brown mole, smaller, but a mole exactly like the bigger one Big Jacquet called his “Beauty-Spot.”

The last vestige of doubt vanished. No, this was not his child ; he was the child of the other man . . . Everything round him seemed to fade away, and the blaze on the hearth seemed to enter his chest and burn his flesh. He seized the boy by the collar :

“Get out . . . Never let me see you again . . . Out with you !”

The child resisted, but he dragged him with one hand to the door, pulled it open and flung him out as one would some unclean beast, and banged it to again.

A ferocious growl . . . a cry of agony rang through the darkness. The man stood stupefied, unable to think. But the mother, who had been listening in the next room, came hurrying out. Not seeing the child, and noting the wildness in her husband's eyes, she shouted :

“What have you done?”

Another cry rang out :

“Mother . . . Moth . . .”

She rushed outside, calling :

“My little one! My little one!”

The child lay panting at the bottom of the steps, his face all torn by the dog's fangs. The beast tried to keep its grip on its prey, but she paid no attention to it, and seizing the boy in her arms, dragged him away.

She laid him on the table. His throat was open, his breath came in short gasps. She showered passionate kisses on his poor mud-filled hair, on his poor little blood-covered face, on his open mouth from which the death-rattle was coming . .

Crouched in a heap on the floor, his eyes shut, his fingers in his ears, the man was sobbing :

“My little one, Holy Virgin, save my little one!”

XX

THAT SCOUNDREL MIRON

No one ever understood how this woman, who was neither young nor pretty, got complete possession of the heart, the mind, the whole life of Miron. Directly he met her he broke with his best friends, left off going to his familiar haunts, and instead of devoting himself, as formerly, to Art for Art's sake, took to painting the rankest pot-boilers. When a man who had been a great friend in the old days ventured to say :

"You're an idiot, Miron. You are spoiling your style, abusing your talent . . ." he only shrugged his shoulders and said : "Nonsense." When the friend insisted, reminding him of the conscientious work, full of more than promise, he had done in those old days, of his dreams of Fame, he grew angry.

"My talent? My dreams? You make me laugh. When I had them, I slept in a garret, I had one meal a day. I know people will now stop saying : ' You'll see, he'll be rich some day.' But meanwhile I can eat as much as I like, and I am

free from sordid worries. I am happy, very happy."

He walked rapidly away. But when he was sure that he was out of sight, he stopped at a café and sat for hours lost in thought, with an empty glass in front of him. Miron lied; he was not happy. At first his love had absorbed him to the exclusion of everything else. To get the extra money that was necessary for his new kind of existence he had dashed off little sketches and drawings for the illustrated papers, and when he felt too disgusted with this prostitution of his talent, he had consoled himself by thinking that before long he would return to serious work. But as time flew by, he had become morally weak, almost cowardly, and now there was a gnawing bitterness at the bottom of his heart, and he was ashamed of himself, ashamed of the soulless love in which he had slowly but surely lost his better self. Debts accumulated, and at last there came a day when, worn out by the threats of those to whom he owed money and by scenes with his mistress, he lost his head and wrote a cheque he could not meet. He hoped to be able to get the money before the cheque was presented, but he was not able to do so, and, taking fright, he fled from Paris, from France.

To avoid rousing suspicion he went alone; his mistress was to follow next day. He was so

certain she would come he went to bed and fell asleep happily, almost without remorse. He expected a letter from her in the morning telling the time of her arrival; next night there came instead a telegram with just four words: "I am not coming."

At first he was too stunned to take it in: it did not seem possible she could have written that. But on reflection he told himself without bitterness that after all she was right; he was a thief. Thoughts of the Lost Love merged themselves in the remembrance of the days when his face was set towards Fame, and a great weariness, mental and physical, made him feel like a child that had lost itself. You need courage to make an effort to save yourself. He had none left. He resolved to go back to Paris, to be arrested, to be punished. Nothing could be worse than what he had already suffered because of his voluntary artistic downfall. Indeed, it would only seem natural, right, that he should be publicly disgraced. He hesitated a little at the thought of the court, prison, the dishonour from which it was still possible to save himself. But why should he mind? A man might make an effort if he had to consider a wife, parents, friends, anyone he respected; or even if he were well-known, if his name stood for something good . . . But he?

He took up the newspaper, looked at it without

interest, and became very pale. There was a big head-line : "DISAPPEARANCE OF THE ARTIST MIRON." It was a long article, and a new thought came to him as he read and re-read it. Every day a dishonest cashier disappears; every day a forger is arrested—did people take any real interest in them? This article made it clear that his flight had aroused unusual interest, that his loss caused regret. If so much space were devoted to him, it showed that the public had begun to recognize his talent, and valued it. He was not unknown. He was "Somebody;" he had a name.

His Infamy was the revelation of his Glory. The idea of prison that had before weighed so lightly, now horrified him. He was tortured by shame, fear, and pride. For days he shut himself up in his room, watching suspiciously anyone who stopped under his window, reading with passionate interest all that the papers continued to say about his disappearance and, above all, about his work. Before long he was relegated to the second page of the newspapers, then to the third; two succeeding days there was no mention of him; twice or thrice his name cropped up at intervals, then—silence. People ceased talking of him, the authorities left off looking for him. He felt sure he had escaped, that he could come and go as he liked. He was free.

It was only then he realised how completely alone in the world he was.

Then came want; he was penniless. He must do something to earn a living. But what could he do? Drawing? Painting? And give them a chance to recognise his style and so lead to his arrest?

How could he run the risk of reviving memories of himself only to blacken afresh a name he had now become proud of? Never had he been so aware of his real talent as now when he dare not show a new picture. But he must do something to get the money to support life. He thought of giving lessons, but no one cared to have them: he tried to obtain work in an office, but he had not the necessary certificates. He did all sorts of odd jobs, even the humblest, those that demand nothing but physical strength. His clothes wore out, became covered with stains; he lost his looks, his hair and beard grew grey. Over and over again he determined to kill himself, but resolution failed him at the last moment. His mind would travel back to the old days, to the little studio where he had dreamed such great dreams, and a vague feeling of hope would change the current of his thoughts.

The vision of himself evoked by this remembrance of himself as he used to be only grew more

vivid as the years passed, and by slow degrees he became possessed by a longing either to become that old self again, or to create another personality on the same lines. This longing sustained him through the long, dreary months of hardship in which he tried to save some money, economizing in food, sometimes even sleeping in the open. Halfpenny by halfpenny the little hoard accumulated, and at last he found himself in possession of a small sum. The enthusiasm of youth had come back to him; he took to making sketches, on a white wall, on the corner of a table, anywhere; everything he saw presented itself as a picture, and when he had a hundred francs, he took the train and returned to France. Fifteen years had gone by since he left Paris. Who would remember him? Who would recognize him with his white hair, his long beard, his bent shoulders?

At first he hardly dare go out, but when confidence came, his steps were drawn irresistibly towards the windows of the shops of the picture-dealers. There he saw new names, others that were familiar to him, and he found himself—he who had never in bygone days spoken of his talent—comparing himself with these painters, saying: “I can do better than that!”

He bought a canvas, some colours and brushes and began to work in his little attic. He painted

feverishly, hesitating as does a convalescent who fears movement after a long illness. When he had finished the picture, he spent a whole day looking at it, asking himself :

“ Is it good ? Is it bad ? ”

He no longer felt the ability to criticise his own work. At length he pulled himself together, signed the picture with the first name that came into his head, Lorient : put the canvas under his arm, and set off for a dealer's shop. When he got there he was almost too agitated to speak, and he stammered as he said :

“ I am a painter . . . I have no money . . . I wondered if you would buy a picture . . . ”

“ By whom ? ”

“ By—by me : ”

“ What's your name ? ”

“ Lorient. ”

“ I'm sorry, but we are not buying anything just at present. ”

He grew pale, and his throat was dry as he held out the canvas.

“ You might at least look at it. ”

The dealer glanced at it, came forward, took it in his hands, and called his partner.

“ Look at this. What do you think of it ? ”

“ Not at all bad. ”

“ You mean remarkably good, ” said the other

"Do you mean to say it's the work of that old fellow?"

"Yes."

They stood together near the mantelshelf examining it closely, and Miron heard one say:

"Astonishing—amazing! Do you know what it reminds me of? It's like the work of that scoundrel Miron, only ten times better."

Miron, standing motionless in a corner near the door, drew himself up sharply.

"What did you say?" he asked.

The dealer smiled. "We weren't talking of you. I was telling my partner that your work recalls that of a painter called Miron."

Miron repeated reflectively:

"Miron . . . Miron . . ."

"I have a little thing of his here . . . Did you know him?"

"Yes," murmured Miron.

"You have his style, his quality, but your work is better than his—though as a dealer I ought not to tell you so."

"Oh, no . . . It's not better," stammered Miron, his eyes on the picture they had taken from the window to show him.

"Yes, it is. Miron painted instinctively. You are a finished artist. The proof of my opinion is that I am prepared not only to take this picture of yours, but as many more as you can paint. I

will sell them all for you. In two months your work will be known, in two years you will be celebrated, and I guarantee Miron will be quickly forgotten."

Miron became paler as he listened. The words of high praise which would have delighted him in the old days, now tortured him. He suddenly realised that all he cared for, all he respected in himself, was the man he had been before his fall, the Miron he could no longer be, the Miron he had just heard condemned to death. What did the success, the failure, of "Loriot" mean to him? He was not Loriot; Loriot was a stranger who was invited to come forward as the successful rival of his real self, an Unknown who would efface his name and what it stood for in the art-world. The dealer went on talking, but he did not listen, did not hear. He imagined a buyer coming in and asking for a Miron, and this man replying, with his abominable smile, as he showed Loriot's canvas:

"Miron? . . . Here's something much better. Look at this."

He could not stand the thought. He grieved for his dead self as a man mourns the loss of a last love.

"Let us come to terms," the dealer was saying, "How much do you want?"

Miron raised his sad eyes, but made no reply.

He did not seem to grasp the meaning of the question.

"Of course you understand that I can't offer much for the first picture. It will be some time before people understand the difference between Lorient and Miron. Most buyers need guidance. But it will end by Miron going to the wall."

The painter was still silent. The other believed he was considering the price.

"What do you say to——"

Miron stretched his hand.

"I'd rather wait. I'll come back some other time . . ."

"All right. But leave the picture. I'll put it in the window instead of the Miron."

"No," said Miron.

"You are making a great mistake. A man doesn't hesitate when a chance like this comes his way. Why, if I had offered that scoundrel Miron what I am now offering you, it is more than likely he'd be here now, would never have done what he did."

"That's true," Miron murmured. He was trembling.

"You can't possibly refuse my offer. It would be childish,"

"I do refuse it. Give me the picture."

"But I——"

"Give me the picture," repeated Miron. His

voice was hoarse, and there was a curious gleam in the depths of his eyes.

"It's a great pity," declared the dealer. "I repeat I would have made a bigger name for you than Miron made."

"That's true," replied Miron for the second time, and he left the shop.

It was growing dark. Some people who were hurrying along stumbled up against him. It was a damp, dreary evening, very like the night of his flight. He stood on the kerbstone, his picture in his hand. He held it for a second at arm's length, then threw it in the road in front of a passing carriage.

"You've dropped something," said a man.

"I know . . . it's nothing . . . thank you," replied Miron.

At that moment the hoof of the horses struck the frame . . . then came the wheel. The noise it made as it passed over the picture was hardly audible, but it split the canvas, and crushed it in the mud so that little remained of it but a grey mass like crumpled paper.

Miron went back to the shop-window. There, in a place of honour, hung his picture: through the mist that blurred the lights he could see the glimmer of the little plaque on the frame that bore his name; Miron. He looked at it for a long time with eyes that shone with tenderness, thoughts of the

past filling his mind. A tear rolled down his cheek as he turned and walked away in the slow rain that was making the pavement shine.

XXI

THE TAINT

The prisoner had listened to the charge in complete silence, and had replied to the questions of the Judge in evasive phrases :

“ I was alone when my child was born. I tried to get up, to call for help. I had not the strength. I put it beside me in my bed . . . Afterwards I must have lost consciousness. When I came to myself in the morning, its body was cold . . . Had I overlain and suffocated it ? . . . Was it dead when I placed it by my side ? . . . How could I possibly know, seeing I hardly remember anything that happened before I fainted ? . . . ”

“ Did it cry ? ”

“ I don't know. ”

“ How do you explain your composure in the presence of your maid ? Witnesses will tell you presently that you were quite calm when you saw the little corpse. Let us suppose for a moment that it was an accident. You buried its father three months before the child was born. Having lost your husband, his child ought to have been doubly dear to you, for it seems—if I speak of the

evidence of one witness, I neither can nor will pass over in silence that of others—it seems your marriage was one of inclination, of love, and that you had been perfectly happy in the union. Yet if we leave these moral considerations and turn to material proofs, the doctors will tell you that the neck showed marks of strangulation, scratches like those made by finger-nails, and that not only was the child likely to live, but that it had lived, you understand, had lived for a considerable time . . .”

She lost her assurance and burst into sobs. When she was calmer, the Judge went on :

“Come now, think : what have you to say in reply ?”

With a gesture of weariness she lifted her long widow’s veil, and at the sight of her face, pretty in spite of being swollen with tears, her trembling lips and reddened eyes, a feeling of pity passed through the court, and the silence became intense, almost respectful.

“You must please forgive me for having evaded your questions so long,” she said. “I can’t lie any more. This suffering is too much for me. Perhaps it will comfort me if I tell the truth. I admit it : it was I, yes, I, who killed my child.”

The judge made a gesture. She stretched out her hands as if to stop a coming accusation.

“But I did not premeditate my crime, I swear I did not. I will explain as quickly as I can so as

to end it all as quickly as possible, never again to hear anyone speak of it . . . never . . . never . . .

"I was enceinte when my husband fell ill. Till then his health had been perfect. At first I believed it was some passing indisposition, and attached no importance to it. He himself tried to behave as if he were quite well. But I ended by becoming anxious, more because of his curiously preoccupied manner than because of any actual suffering. He had always been so good-tempered, so light-hearted, but when I begged him to tell me what was wrong with him, he replied nervously, almost angrily :

"Nothing at all . . . I assure you it's nothing . . . Don't worry me . . . I'm just a little out of sorts . . . Nothing of any importance . . . In a few days I shall be all right . . ."

"I asked him to see a doctor: he became violently angry. •

"Finding him so changed in manner, so changed in his attitude towards me, I began to wonder whether I had been mistaken in my estimate of him. Was it possible his character was so different from what I had believed it to be ?

"Then came an evening when, just as we were finishing dinner, he complained of violent pains in his head. Almost at once his eyes became glazed, he jumped up, upsetting his chair, and without any warning fell flat on the ground, dragging the

plates and glasses from the table with him. He struggled, making inarticulate cries, foaming at the mouth. The servants were terrified. I knelt down and spoke to him: he did not hear me, did not know me. .

“The doctor who came—they had brought the nearest one—made a very slight examination. I know now that it was not necessary to look long to understand. He asked if he were subject to attacks of the kind. I replied:

“‘This is the first. What can it be?’

“He looked curiously at me, no doubt very astonished by my question, shook his head, and said gently:

“‘Sooner or later you will have to know. It is epilepsy.’

“Ah! that word, that terrible word! It still rings in my ears. I remembered how I had never heard it without feeling terror and a sort of disgust. Once, passing a crowd in the street with my father, we stopped to see what had happened, but my father drew me away quickly: ‘Don’t look . . . it’s an epileptic . . .’

“And here my husband was one . . . I stood stupified, not daring to go near the unfortunate being they were holding down on the floor.

“‘I am very sorry,’ said the doctor, probably regretting his brutal frankness, ‘but you must not let the word make the thing seem more

terrible than it really is. It is useless to deny that it is a grave form of illness, but it is much more common than is usually believed, and there is little real danger for those who are able to be properly looked after. Your husband will recover from this attack, and will probably not have another for months, for years . . . All I can do is to warn you that for some time to come you must not let there be any chance of your having a child.'

" 'I have been enceinte for two months . . . '

" He bit his lips, prescribed a sleeping draught, and left. My husband recovered consciousness during the night. When he saw me by his bedside he hardly dare hold out his hand to me, hardly dare I put mine in his . . . I had become convinced that he had known all along about his disease, had hidden it from me, that his refusals to allow himself to be looked after, his black moods, his ill-temper, had all been due to the fear that in the end I must inevitably know the truth.

" I did not say anything to my parents. I was divided between the fear of finding myself alone with my husband, and that of revealing the nature of his illness to others. But the desire to know for certain had got possession of me. Nor was it difficult to find out. People are always only too happy to tell you about the misfortunes of others. And in a few days I had learnt the history of my husband's family :

“His father—died of epilepsy.

“One of his brothers, who was supposed to have gone abroad and had never been heard of since, was shut up in a lunatic asylum.

“Another—an idiot who died at twenty.

“My husband—epileptic since the age of fourteen.

“This was the horrible family line that stretched itself before me. The same taint had affected them one and all, and I became terrified as I wondered whether the child I was carrying in me might not come into the world cursed in the same way.

“Now that I am confessing, I will make a clean breast of it. You may condemn me as a bad wife and unworthy daughter, if you like, before you pass judgment on me as a criminal mother—what does it matter? I wish you to understand that from that moment my life was a Hell: that I lived through weeks of perpetual nightmare: that I grew to hate equally the parents of my husband who had forced this terrible inheritance on him, my husband himself for having cruelly deceived me, and my own parents who had neglected the chief of their duties, that of knowing to whom they gave me.

“Nevertheless, because I respected myself, and also because I felt ashamed, I remained silent.

“Six weeks later my husband had another attack

more violent than the last. After that the fits became more frequent. He soon had one every day, then two. Nothing did him any good, and at last he died in horrible convulsions.

“His death effaced my bitterness. I was overwhelmed with sorrow. I excused the poor dead soul, knowing that it was his great love that had made him hide the truth from me.

“The months that followed had no special interest. I lived through them absorbed in my own thoughts as I waited for the birth of my child.

“I must have made a mistake in my calculations, for it came ten or fifteen days sooner than I expected. That explains the absence of a nurse, midwife, or doctor. I had not the strength to get to the bell. But the thought of the child that would so soon be mine comforted me, and I was almost happy in my agony.

“But just as it was born a frightful clearness of vision came to me. I said just now that I didn’t hear it cry. I lied. I heard the sharp little cry, and it was that cry that pierced my brain like an arrow.

“Awful visions flashed before my eyes. I saw its father and his ghastly agonies. I imagined I saw the brother struggling in his straight waistcoat: the other, the repulsive idiot; and the grandfather, the root from which these branches sprang, epileptic also. I saw clearly what my child

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in his turn would be. I was afraid both of what I seemed to see, and of what I probably should see in the future .

“But that was nothing compared with what followed. Suddenly, as I felt the little piece of living flesh move against my side, a mad terror overwhelmed me. I tried to soothe myself by saying it was my child, my own child. But a voice seemed to hiss in my ears :

“‘Child of a madman ! Child of a madman !’

“I began to shudder as one would at the touch of some loathly reptile . . . It is unbelievable . . . How can anyone understand ? . . A mother afraid of HER OWN CHILD . . . of a thing so fragile, hardly alive . . . But it was so, and I could not dominate the feeling. I pulled myself away from it, and it seemed as if I were bound to try to defend myself against something terrible . . something monstrous . . . I flung myself on it . . . I seized the little neck that slipped under my fingers, and stretching out my arms so that if there were any resistance it could not even touch me, I . . . miserable wretch . . . savage . . . criminal . . . I tightened my fingers . . .”

She broke off, and falling on her knees, her face in her hands, sobbed :

“Oh ! my baby . . . my little baby . . . afraid of you . . .”

XXII

THE KISS

“ Yes, Sister, it was for a woman he did it, my poor boy. Soon after he knew her, he changed completely. He had always been so quiet and good-tempered, and he suddenly became irritable and short in his answers. He invented all sorts of stories so as not to have to give me his wages on Saturdays. Sometimes I waited up for him till two in the morning, and when I heard the door shut, and knew he was in bed, I used to go quietly to his room, and I could see that his eyes were swollen. Once the tears were still wet on his face.

“ At first I thought he had got into trouble at the factory. I went to see the master, and he told me there was nothing wrong there, but that the boy didn't work as well as he used to, and that it was to be feared he had fallen into the hands of bad companions. I took care not to let him see that I was watching him, but I made enquiries, and I found that he was often with a woman, a low woman, a prostitute . . . excuse me, Sister . . . who walked the streets at night.

“ If it had only been a work-girl like himself, in

spite of being old and needing all the help he can give me, I would have let them marry. But that! One day I went to see her. I asked her to leave him alone: I told her he was all I had in the world. She used awful language and turned me out, and as I went downstairs she called after me:

“ ‘I have taken him away from you, have I? All right. You shall have him back right enough . . . you’ll see! . . .’ ”

“ Next day they brought the poor child home on a stretcher. He had a shot in his chest. From what I could learn or guess, they had quarrelled because of me, and because he didn’t give her enough money. When he realized that he no longer amused her, that she didn’t want to see him again, he lost his head, and without thinking of himself, or me, or anything, he tried to kill himself. Ah! it is hard to bear such things at my age.”

Standing near the narrow, hospital bed, the nun had listened in silence. The sick youth, who had been in a state of coma, was beginning to give little broken cries like calls. Trembling, the mother asked:

“ What does the doctor say? Is there any chance of his getting well?”

“ I’m afraid, poor mother, that he is very ill. But we haven’t lost hope. He is young . . . Now you must go home. He must not have the agita-

tion of seeing you when he first recovers consciousness. You may be quite sure he will be well looked after. You can come again to-morrow for a few minutes . . . every day if you like."

Weeping bitterly, but biting her lips to prevent her sobs being heard by the patients in the other beds, the old woman walked slowly away, turning every few steps to look back. †

A deep silence fell on the ward. The shadows of night were creeping in. The whisperings and movements caused by an exit or an entrance gradually died away. It was the hour when the sick, tired by a long, weary day, fall gently asleep. The Nun sat down by the pillow of the sick boy.

She was very young. Her eyes were clear as crystal, and there was still in them something of the wonder you see in those of children. Her lips were curved: there had been no time for them to take the lines given by the never-ceasing murmur of prayers. Her face was round and rosy: little curls with golden lights in them sometimes escaped from under the white band that circled her forehead. But notwithstanding her fresh young laughter, she knew all the words and ways that soothe pain. When she spoke to the sick men, her voice had tender inflexions like those of a mother or elder sister.

Towards the middle of the night the boy recovered consciousness. The Nun had not left his

side. He wanted to ask questions, but she told him he must keep quiet. He obeyed, docile as a child, and fell asleep.

During the first days he saw her constantly, for she rarely left his side. Timid, almost ashamed, he hardly ever spoke, lying motionless for hours with his eyes shut. It was only when the door opened or shut that he raised his eyelids, and they would fall again immediately.

More than once on these occasions he had spoken, saying shyly :

“ Sister . . . ”

But when the Nun had bent over him with a :
“ What is it, little one ? ” he turned away his head, murmuring :

“ Nothing . . . Nothing . . . ”

One morning he had more courage :

“ Tell me, please, Sister, if anyone has come to ask about me since I came here ? ”

“ But of course. Your mother . . . you know that, don’t you ? ”

“ Yes . . . But anyone else ? ”

“ No, nobody. ”

He turned away his head, but she saw there were tears in his eyes.

“ Come, come, little one, this won’t do. What’s the matter ? ”

A pressing need to confide in someone after his long silence drew the confession from him :

"It is so unkind. I can tell you anything . . . you are so good to me . . . and I shall feel better if you know . . . Mother doesn't know, she thinks it was an accident . . . But it wasn't. I tried to kill myself . . ."

The Nun stopped him with a gesture :

"She knows all about it."

"Ah!"

For some time he was silent, slowly shaking his head :

"My poor old mother . . . I have given her so much trouble. She will forgive me, for she knows it wasn't my fault . . . I was so unhappy. When that woman turned me away, I thought I couldn't go on living without her. I loved her so much . . . She could have done anything she liked with me . . . And you see that even though she knows it is because of her I am here, she has never even come to ask how I am! Whenever I heard the door open, I thought I should see her walking towards me . . . But now I know she will never come . . . I don't want her to, either . . . I shall leave off thinking of her . . . I shall leave off loving her . . . No, I don't love her at all now . . ."

The tears that were in his eyes gave the lie to his words.

Presently he asked :

"It is a great sin, isn't it, Sister, to try to commit suicide?"

"A very great sin. The greatest of all."

"But if you are too unhappy. . . wouldn't God know that, and understand . . ."

She bowed her head and clasped her hands: her shoulders moved, and the wings of her white head-dress trembled as she replied in a low voice:

"Shh . . . Shh . . . You must not tire yourself, little one . . . You must shut your eyes and go to sleep . . ."

He seemed to do so, but about two in the morning he became very restless. They sent for the Nun.

"Well, and what's all this about?" she said as she bent over him. "You are not being good?"

He burst into harsh, incoherent words that came in gasps.

She took one of his hands in hers, and with the other gently wiped the perspiration from his forehead, trying to calm him.

Soothed as if by a caress, he grew quiet. He breathed more easily, his voice was even, his words intelligible.

"Yes, I know I am late . . . It was my work that kept me . . . I will come earlier next time. You don't like the flowers? . . . On Sunday we will pick a lot . . . We will go to the river for the day, we will have dinner on the grass . . . We

will go home early, and you will see how much I love you! I love your eyes and your hair . . . all of you. Your skin smells like flowers."

This was said in a tone of supplication, and it sounded like a passionate prayer. But soon he was talking too quickly again, the words running into one another.

The Nun, her eyes anxious, let him talk on, and the prayers she murmured mechanically sounded like the accompaniment to a Song of Love.

He began to moan and shudder, and suddenly he sprang up:

"What! Going away? Never see you again?"

He was panting now, the breath coming in short, painful gasps. The Nun hurriedly brought a light and looked carefully at him.

He was livid, and his eyes were wild. Deep shadows stretched from the eyes to the corner of the lips: the temples seemed to have fallen in. His hair, drenched with perspiration, was sticking in wisps on his forehead, and his palpitating nostrils seemed to draw all the rest of his face to them.

Ah! she knew them, these agonized faces that look as if the mind were trying in one minute to live over again the whole of a life . . .

Softly, so as not to disturb those in the other beds, she said to a night-nurse:

"Quick . . . quick . . . bring the doctor and

send for the chaplain . . . No. 6 is very ill . . .”

Kneeling by the bed, she began to pray :

“Thy will be done, O God, but pardon, oh !
pardon this poor child.”

The dying boy had taken her folded hands in his, and went on talking, but his voice was now quiet : far, far away.

“Don’t go . . . I will give you everything you want . . . anything, if you only will stay with me . . . If you leave me, I shall die . . . Come . . .”

His head brushed against the forehead of the Nun. His neck stretched forwards, he bent towards her.

“Come . . . I adore you . . .”

He was touching her eyes and cheeks . . . He reached her lips——

She started back, and tried to rise.

But he grasped her shoulders, and his Dream carrying him right over the threshold of Eternity, he implored :

“Oh, stay . . . I love you . . .”

She shut her eyes and bent her head. He pressed his lips on hers in a long, fervent, noiseless kiss, one of those deep kisses in which two beings merge their identity, a kiss like those he had learnt in the arms of the prostitute.

Under it the trembling lips of the Nun

opened . . . was it in a prayer? Or had her thoughts flashed back to the fiancé whose death had turned her life to God?

XXIII

A MANIAC

He was neither malicious nor bloodthirsty. It was only that he had conceived a very special idea of the pleasures of existence. Perhaps it was that, having tried them all, he no longer found the thrill of the unexpected in any of them.

He went to the theatre, not to follow the piece or to look through his opera-glass at the spectators, but because he hoped that some day a fire might break out. At the fair of Neuilly, he visited the various menageries in anticipation of a catastrophe: the tamer attacked by the beasts. He had tried bull-fights, but soon tired of them: the slaughter appeared too well-regulated, too natural, and it disgusted him to watch suffering.

What he was always looking for was the quick and keen anguish caused by some unexpected disaster, some new kind of accident, so much so, that having been at the Opéra Comique on the night of the great fire, from which he escaped unhurt, that having been a couple of steps from the cage the day the celebrated Fred was devoured by his lions, he lost almost all interest in theatres

and menageries. To those who were astonished at this apparent change in his tastes, he replied :

“ But there’s nothing more to see there. They don’t give me the slightest sensation. All that I care for is the effect produced on others and on me.”

When he was deprived of these two favourite pleasures—it had taken him ten years to get what he wanted from them—he fell into a state of mental and physical depression, and for some months rarely left the house.

Then came a morning when the walls of Paris were covered with multi-coloured posters that showed on an azure background a curious inclined track which came down, wound round, and fell like a ribbon. Up at the top, little bigger than a dot, a cyclist seemed to be waiting for a signal to rush down the giddy descent. At the same time the newspapers gave accounts of an extraordinary feat that explained the meaning of this weird picture.

It seemed that the cyclist dashed down the narrow path at fullest speed, went up round the loop, then down to the bottom. For a second during this fantastic performance he was head downwards, his feet up in the air.

The acrobat invited the press to come and examine the track and the machine so that they might see there was no trickery about it, and he

explained that his ability to perform the feat was due to calculations of extreme precision, and that so long as he kept his nerve nothing could prevent its accomplishment.

Now it is certain that when the life of a man hangs on keeping his nerve, it hangs on a very insecure peg.

Since the appearance of the advertisement, our maniac had recovered some of his good humour. He went to the private demonstration, and becoming convinced that a new sensation awaited him, was in a seat on the first night to watch closely this looping the loop.

He had taken a box that faced the end of the track, and he sat there alone, not wishing to have near him anyone who might distract his close attention.

The whole thing was over in a few minutes. He had just time to see the black speck appear on the whiteness of the track, a formidable spurt, a plunge, a gigantic bound, and that was all. It gave him a thrill swift and vivid as lightning.

But as he went out with the crowd, he reflected that though he might feel this sensation twice or thrice, it must eventually pall, as all the others had done. He had not found what he was looking for. Then came the thought that a man's nerve had limitations, that the strength of a bicycle is, after all, only relative, and that there is no track

of the kind, however secure it may seem, that may not some time give way. And he arrived at the conclusion that it was inevitable that some day an accident must occur..

From this to deciding to watch for that accident was a very small step.

"I will go to see this looping of the loop every night," he decided. "I will go till I see that man break his head. If it doesn't happen during this three months in Paris, I will follow him elsewhere till it does."

For two months, every evening at the same time, he went to the same box and sat in the same seat. The management had grown to know him. He had taken the box for the whole period of the turn, and they wondered vainly what could account for this costly whim.

One evening when the acrobat had gone through his performance earlier than usual, he saw him in a corridor and went up to him. There was no need for an introduction.

"I know you already," said the bicyclist. "You are always at the hall. You come every night."

Surprised, he asked :

"It is true I am deeply interested in your performance . . . But who has told you so?"

The man smiled :

"No one. I see you."

“That is very surprising. At such a height . . . at such a moment . . . your mind is sufficiently free to pick out the spectators down below?”

“Certainly not. I don’t see the spectators down below. It would be extremely dangerous for me to pay any attention to a crowd that moves and chatters. In all matters connected with my profession, in addition to the turn itself, its theory and practice, there is something else, a kind of trick . . .”

He started:

“A trick?”

“Don’t misunderstand me. I don’t mean trickery. I mean something of which the public has no suspicion, something that is perhaps the most delicate part of the whole performance. Shall I explain? Well, I accept it as a fact that it is not possible to empty the brain till it contains but one idea, impossible to keep the mind fixed on any one thought. As complete concentration is necessary, I choose in the Hall some object on which I fix my eyes. I see nothing but that object. From the second I have my gaze on it, nothing else exists. I get on the saddle. My hands gripping the bars, I think of nothing: neither of my balance, nor my direction. I am sure of my muscles: they are as firm as steel. There is only one part of me I am afraid of: my eyes. But once I have fixed them on something, I

am sure of them as well. Now, the first night I performed here, it happened that my eyes fell on your box. I saw you. I saw nothing but you. Without knowing it, you caught and held my eyes . . . You became the point, the object of which I have told you. The second day I looked for you in the same place. The following days it was the same. And so it happens that now, as soon as I appear, by instinct my eyes turn to you. You help me : you are the precious aid indispensable to my performance. Now do you understand why I know you ?”

Next day the maniac was in his usual seat. In the hall there were the usual movements and murmurs of keen anticipation. Suddenly a dense silence fell : that profound silence when you feel that an audience is holding its breath. The acrobat was on his machine, which was held by two men, waiting for the signal to set off. He was balanced to perfection, his hands grasping the bar, his head up, his gaze fixed straight ahead.

He cried “ Hop ! ” and the men pushed off.

Just at that moment, in the most natural way possible, the maniac rose, pushed back his seat, and went to one at the other side of the box. Then a terrible thing happened. The cyclist was thrown violently up in the air. His machine rushed forwards, flew up, and lurching out into the midst of

the shrieks of terror that filled the hall, fell among the crowd.

With a methodical gesture, the maniac put on his overcoat, smoothed his hat on the cuff of his sleeve, and went out.

XXIV

THE 10.50 EXPRESS

"They say you are leaving us to-day, Sir?" the cripple said to me.

"I must. I have to be at Marseilles on Monday morning. I shall go by the 10.50 express from the Gare de Lyon. It's a good train . . . but you ought to know it—you were employed by the P.L.M. before you fell ill, weren't you?"

He shut his eyes and his face became suddenly very pale as he replied :

"Yes . . . I know it . . . too well . . ."

There were tears under his eyelids as, after a moment's silence, he added :

"No one knows it as well as I do! . . ."

Thinking he was moved by regret for the work he was no longer able to do, I said :

"It must have been an interesting job. Fine work needing plenty of intelligence."

He shuddered; his paralysed body strained violently, and there was a look of horror in his eyes as he protested :

"Don't say that, Sir! Fine work? You mean work of terror and death . . . of horror and

nightmare . . Sir, I am nothing to you, but I am going to ask you a favour . . . don't go by that train. Take any other train you like, but don't go by the 10.50 . . .”

“Why?” I queried smiling. “Are you superstitious?”

“I'm not superstitious . . . but I was the driver in charge of the express the day of the disaster of 24th July, 1894. I will tell you about it and you will understand . . .

“We left the Gare de Lyon at the usual time, and had been running about two hours. The day had been suffocatingly hot. In spite of the speed we were going at, the breeze that came to me on the platform was stifling, the heavy, sultry air that goes before a storm . . .

“All at once, as if an electric light had been switched off, everything went out in the sky. Not a star left. The moon gone, and great flashes of lightning cutting the night with a light clear enough to make the darkness that followed black as ink.

“I said to my stoker:

“‘We're in for it! There'll be a mighty down-pour.’

“‘Not before time. I couldn't stand this furnace much longer. You'll have to keep your eyes skinned for the signals.’

“‘No fear. I can see right enough.’

"The thunder was so loud I couldn't hear the hammering of the wheels, nor the exhaust of the engine. The rain still kept off and the storm came nearer. We were running right into it. It seemed as if we were running after it.

"You needn't be a coward to feel a bit queer when you find yourself being hurled into a great storm on a monster of steel that rushes on like a madman.

"In front of us, quite close, a flash of lightning pierced the ground, and at the same time a terrible thunderclap sounded, then another, so violent that I shut my eyes and sank on my knees.

"I remained like that for some seconds, all of a heap, stunned, feeling as if I'd had a heavy blow on the back of the neck.

"At last I came to myself. I was still on my knees, my back against the partition of the platform. It seemed as if I had come from hundred of miles away. I tried to get up. Impossible. My legs were doubled under me, useless. I thought I must have broken something in my fall, but I felt no pain of any kind. I tried to help myself up with my hands . . . my arms were hanging powerless by my sides.

"There I was, stupefied, with the extraordinary feeling that my arms and legs didn't belong to me, that I had no command over them . . . that they refused to obey me . . . that they were things

with no more life in them than my clothes which the draught was blowing about . . . Some power I didn't understand prevented my opening my eyes.

"We were running at full speed. The storm was still raging, but not so violently, and further away. It began to rain. I heard it hissing on the steel, and I felt the warm drops on my face.

"Suddenly something in me relaxed, and I felt all right again, quite well, just a little tired. I remembered where I was and my work, and that brought me back to realities with a jerk, and not yet understanding what had happened, why I felt as if I were paralysed, I called to my stoker to help me to get up.

"No reply.

"The noise is deafening on an engine going at full speed. I shouted louder :

"'Francois! Hullo there, Francois! Give me a hand.'

"Still no reply. Then an awful fear gripped me. Fear of what? I didn't know, but the shock of it made me open my eyes and give a yell. It was a yell of terror, and there was every reason for it.

"The platform was empty. My stoker had disappeared.

"In one second I understood exactly what had happened.

“The flash of lightning had struck us; it had killed the stoker and he had fallen out on the line. I—I was paralysed.

“No, Sir, not even if I were a great scholar and searched and searched for words, could I give you an idea of the horror I felt. The mate who ought to have been beside me, able to help me, had disappeared as if by magic, and behind me two hundred passengers were sleeping or chatting peacefully in their carriages with no suspicion that they were being whirled onwards in a mad rush to certain death. For the man in charge of the train, their driver, was a helpless mass, unable to stretch out an arm, paralysed . . . a cripple . . . Me! . .

“My brain grew as active as my body was inert. First I saw clearly the line stretching before me. I saw the rails shining in the moonlight. We were rushing along . . . how we tore along! . . . I became aware of the sensation of speed that habit had made me lose. The train passed a little station like a flash of lightning, but not too quickly for me to see a signalman dozing in his box near a telegraphic apparatus. A jolt or two on the turn-table; a clanging of plates; the line marked by rails that crossed each other, suddenly large, then small . . . the deep cutting, and once more the dash into the darkness.

“Then came the tunnel into which we plunged like a raging hurricane . . . Once again the open

line. Now I knew where we were, and I told myself that we were bound to derail, that in two minutes we should come to a sharp curve, and that at the rate we were going at we were certain to bound off . . .

"But God didn't mean it to be that! The engine, the whole train, leant over . . . the rails ground frantically against the wheels . . . and we passed! . . .

"This curve had been my chief fear. I breathed again. The fire would go out for want of fuel . . . The engine would stop . . . The guard would hurry round to the front of the train . . . I would tell him what had happened . . . He would put fog-signals in front of and behind us. We should be saved! . . .

"But my relief didn't last long. We had just dashed through a station when I saw something that made my hair stand on end: the signal was against us! The block I was entering wasn't free . . .

"I don't know why I didn't go mad. Imagine what can go through a man's mind when, tearing along on an engine going at seventy miles an hour, he is warned that an obstacle bars the road . . .

"I said to myself: 'If you don't stop, you, and with you the whole train, will be smashed to pieces . . . to prevent this awful thing, you need only make a slight movement, the simple move-

ment of taking hold of that lever two feet away from you . . . but you won't make the movement . . . you can't make it . . . you will see the whole thing happen, will have the agony, a hundred times worse than death itself, of sighting the thing on which you will smash, of watching it grow large . . . of rushing on to it . . .'

"I tried to shut my eyes . . . I couldn't . . . In spite of myself I kept on watching, watching . . and I saw it all, Sir, I saw it all. I guessed what the obstacle was before it appeared, and soon there was no doubt about it . . . It was a train that had broken down that was blocking our way. I could see its shadow, its rear-lights. It came nearer . . . It came nearer! Why did I shriek: 'Help! Stop! . . .' Who could hear? It came nearer! All of me was dead except my head. And that was alive with the terrible life of eyes that could see everything even in the blackness of the night, of ears that could hear everything even through the roaring of the wheels, of a frantic will that kept giving me orders like those an officer gives to routed soldiers he is trying to rally.

"It came nearer . . . Only five hundred yards away . . . only three hundred . . . shadowy forms ran about the line . . . only one hundred . . one hundred yards . . . just a flash! . . . It was the end . . . the crash . . . the charnel-heap . . . **Annihilation!**

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"Sir, those who haven't seen it . . .

. . . "I came to myself under a pile of wreckage. Agonized calls for help filled the air. I could see people running through the fields carrying lanterns, and others with the injured in their arms . . . and shrieks . . . and moans . . . and weeping . . .

"I saw, I heard all that, and I didn't care. I was no longer thinking. I didn't call for help . . .

"Between two beams that crossed over my head, so close that my lips touched them, I could see a little bit of sky, very soft, very pure; I just lay looking at a tiny star that trembled there, bright, pretty . . . it amused me . . ."

XXV

"BLUE EYES."

Draped in a loose hospital wrap that made her seem even thinner than she was, the sick girl was standing lost in thought at the foot of her bed.

Her childish face was wasted, and her blue eyes, sad, fathomless, and circled with dark rings, were so unnaturally large they seemed to light up her whole face. Her cheeks burned with a hectic flush, and the deep lines that ran down to her mouth looked as if they had been worn there by the flow of unceasing tears.

She hung her head when the house-surgeon stopped beside her.

"Well, little No. 4, what's this I hear? You want to go out?"

"Yes, Sir . . ." the voice was hardly more than a whisper.

"But that's very foolish . . . You've only been up two or three days. In weather like this, too. You'd certainly fall ill again. Wait a day or two. You're not unhappy here? . . . Has anyone been unkind to you?"

"No . . . oh! no, Sir . . ."

"What is it then? . . ."

There was more energy in her tone as she said:

"I must go out."

And as if anticipating his question, she continued quickly:

"This is All Saints' Day. I promised to take some flowers to my sweetheart's grave . . . I promised . . . He has only me . . . If I don't go, no one will . . . I promised . . ."

A tear shone under her eyelid. She wiped it away with a finger.

The house-surgeon was touched, and either out of curiosity, or so as not to seem awkward and leave her without some word of comfort, he asked:

"Is it long since he died?"

"Nearly a year . . ."

"What was the matter with him?"

She seemed to shrink, to become more frail, her chest more hollow, her hands thinner, as, her eyes half-closed, her lips trembling, she murmured:

"He was executed . . ."

The house-surgeon bit his lip and said in a low voice:

"Poor child. . . I'm very sorry. If you really must go out, go . . . But take care not to catch cold. You must come back to-morrow."

. . . Once outside the hospital gates, she began to shiver.

It was a dreary autumn morning. Moisture

trickled down the walls. Everything was grey : the sky, the houses, the naked trees and the misty distance where people hurried along, anxious to get out of the damp streets.

It had been the middle of summer when she had fallen ill, and her dress was a brightly-hued one of thin cotton. The crumpled ribbon that encircled her wasted neck made her look even more pitiable. The skirt, blouse and neck-tie might have smiled back at the sunshine, but they seemed to droop in sadness in the chill grey setting.

She started off with an uncertain walk, stopping every now and then because she was out of breath and her head swimming.

The people she passed turned to look after her. She seemed to hesitate as if wishing to speak to them, then afraid, walked on, glancing nervously from right to left. In this way she crossed half Paris. She stopped when she came to the Quais, standing to watch the slow, muddy flow of the river. The piercing cold cut through her, and feeling she could not bear much more, she started off again.

When she got to Place Maubert and the Avenue des Gobelins she felt almost at home, for she was now in the neighbourhood in which she had lived. Soon she began to see faces she knew, and she heard someone say as she passed :

"Surely that's Vandat's girl . . . How she has changed!"

"Which Vandat?"

"Vandat the murd . . ."

She quickened her steps, pressing her hands against her face so as not to hear the end of the word . . .

It was getting dark when at last she arrived at the wretched little hotel where she had lodged before she fell ill. She went in. Street-girls and the men they kept were playing cards in the little café downstairs. When they saw her, they called out:

"Hullo! Here's Blue Eyes"—that used to be her nickname. "Come and have a drink, Blue Eyes. Here's a seat . . . come along . . ."

Their welcome touched her, but the thick, rank smoke made her cough, and she could hardly breathe as she replied:

"No . . . I've no time now . . . Is Madame in?"

"Yes, there she is."

She smiled timidly at the manageress.

"I wanted to ask you, Madame, if I could get at my things. The clothes I have on aren't warm enough . . ."

"Any clothes you left were taken up to the attic; they'll be there somewhere. I'll send someone to look for them . . . Sit down by the stove and warm yourself."

"No . . . I've no time now. I'll come back presently."

She went to the door. One of the men jeered :

"At the old business already? You aren't wasting much time."

She went out, and the short stay in the stifling room made the cold outside seem more piercing than ever. People were hurrying along laden with bead wreaths and bouquets of flowers : some were in deep mourning and walked slowly and sadly ; others, dressed in their best clothes, talked and laughed, and one saw at a glance that they were carrying their offerings to the cemetery as a matter of habit, that time had taken the edge from their grief.

Barrows of flowers were drawn up all along the side of the pavement. Chrysanthemums with curled petals drooped over clusters of roses ; here and there mimosa shed its golden powder over bunches of violets. Nearer to the cemetery, in front of the shops of the marble-mason, pots of flowers were arranged on the shelves of stands, insignificant, with neat foliage and restrained colours ; further on were immortelles and large bead wreaths . . .

She looked at all this with eyes that glowed with envy. If only she could get some for him, just a little bunch . . . for Him where he was lying at the far end of the cemetery in his poor unconse-

crated grave, a bare mound, without a single word to show that he was lying there.

“Murderer” . . . that meant nothing to her. He was the being she adored, her Man, the lover who had possessed not only her body but her whole soul . . . In a moment of madness he had killed someone . . . Had not he paid his horrible debt in full?

The day he had been arrested she had sworn never to have anything to do with any other man, never; to give up the life she had been leading, to work, to become an honest girl . . . to live in memories of him . . .

She kept on looking at the flowers. A seller held out a bunch of roses: “A bouquet? Some chrysanthemums then? Violets?”

She passed without replying, for she did not possess one farthing. Yet there was but one idea in her mind—flowers. She must have some flowers . . . she must get some flowers for him somehow . . . she had sworn she would.

She was nearly fainting with hunger and fatigue, but she was no longer aware of it. She was thinking only of the bare strip of earth in the cemetery, imagining it with some flowers brightening it up. But the money . . . how was she to get it? What could she do?

The way that suggested itself was the obvious

one, nor did it seem to clash with her vow to remain true to his memory.

Just as a good artisan returns to his factory, takes up his tools and starts on his work, she mechanically patted her hair into order, arranged her poor dress and began to walk the street as she used to in the old days when her nan, sitting playing cards in the *café*, was the only thing in the world she cared about.

On she walked, her eye watchful, swaying her waist as she whispered between her teeth :

"Stop! . . . I want to speak to you . . ."

But she was too emaciated : one glance at her, and the men hurried away. And indeed her face was no longer a face for pleasure : nor her body, its sharp angles and deep hollows showing clearly under her thin cotton dress.

In bygone days when she was pretty, when she really was the "Blue Eyes", everyone admired, it was different. Now she was only an object of pity.

The daylight was fading. Suppose the cemetery was shut before she was able to buy the flowers . .

A thin, misty rain was falling, silent, impalpable, and everything was becoming wrapped in grey shadows. You could see nothing of her thin face now except her eyes, two great, sad eyes burning with fever.

A man was passing the corner of a quiet street,

his coat-collar up, his hands in his pockets. She brushed up against him and said softly, her whole heart's craving vibrating in her voice :

“ Stop ! . . . Won't you come with me ? . . . ”

He looked at her for a moment. She had gone close up to him, her eyes penetrating his with the inspired expression of one conscious of a high mission.

He took her arm, and she guided him to the low hotel she had recently left. Through the half-open door she said quickly :

“ My key . . . A candle . . . ”

The manageress replied in a low voice :

“ No. 28, second floor, third door.”

The men and the girls in the café bent forward to see who was there, and as she went upstairs she heard exclamations and bursts of laughter.

. . . It was almost dark when she came down again. She threw a hasty good-bye to her companion and set off at a run. Stopping before the first flower-seller she came to, she seized the nearest bunch and threw down the two pieces of silver that clinked in her hands.

Quickly, quickly, she ran to the cemetery. People were coming away in little groups. She trembled. Would there still be time ?

At the entrance the gate-keeper said :

“ Too late ! We're closing now.”

“Oh! please, please. I only want to run in and out again. Just two minutes . . .”

“Very well. But—quick!”

Down the path she rushed, stumbling over the stones in the dark. It was a long way. She could hardly breathe, something was burning painfully in her chest. She stopped by the wall where those who are executed are buried, and fell on her knees, scattering her flowers on the earth. Hot tears streamed from her eyes, dripping between the hands she pressed against her face. She tried to pray, but she could not remember any of the proper words, and she just sobbed, her lips on the ground:

“Oh! my man. . . my man . . .”

Then, so worn out she had lost all sensation in her limbs, but with a feeling of ease, almost of joy in her heart, she rose and hurried away. She even smiled at the gate-keeper as she said:

“You see I haven’t been long.”

But now that it was over, now she had kept her promise to, had been near her man, she became aware again of the cold and her exhaustion. She could hardly drag herself along, her cough was so bad; every now and then she had to stop and lean against the wall.

At last she got back to the hotel and stumbled in at the door. The girls and men were still playing cards in the over-heated smoke-filled room. A

dead silence fell on them all when they saw her. She tried to laugh.

A woman at the far end of the room threw herself back on her chair and cried :

“ You’ve made a fine start, Blue Eyes ! Needed a bit of nerve, didn’t it ? ”

She shrugged her shoulders. The other went on :

“ Did you know who it was ? ”

“ No . . . ”

“ Well, I’ll tell you. It was Le Bingue. ”

Blue Eyes stammered :

“ What do you say ? Le . . . ”

Emptying her glass and taking up her cards again, the girl called back :

“ Yes, Le Bingue . . . You know, the Executioner ! ”

XXVI

THE LAST KISS

“Forgive me . . . Forgive me . . .”

His voice was less assured as he replied :

“Get up, dry your eyes. I, too, have a good deal to reproach myself with.”

“No, no !” she sobbed.

He shook his head.

“I ought never to have left you ; you loved me. Just at first after it all happened . . . when I could still feel the fire of the vitriol burning my face, when I began to realise that I should never see again, that all my life I should be a thing of horror, of Death, certainly I wasn’t able to think of it like that. It isn’t possible to resign oneself all at once to such a fate . . . But living in this eternal darkness, a man’s thoughts pierce far below the surface and grow quiet like those of a person falling asleep, and gradually calm comes. To-day, no longer able to use my eyes, I see with my imagination. I see again our little house, our peaceful days, and your smile. I see your poor little face the night I said that last good-bye.

The judge couldn't imagine any of that, could he? And it was only fair to try to explain, for they thought only of your action, the action that made me into . . . what I am. They were going to send you to prison where you would slowly have faded . . . No years of such punishment for you could have given me back my eyes . . . When you saw me go into the witness-box you were afraid, weren't you? You believed that I would charge you, have you condemned? No, I could never have done that, never . . ."

She was still crying, her face buried in her hands.

"How good you are! . . ."

"I am just . . ."

In a voice that came in jerks she repeated:

"I repent, I repent; I have done the most awful thing to you that a woman could do, and you—you begged for my acquittal! And now you can even find words of pity for me! What can I do to prove my sorrow? Oh, you are wonderful : . . wonderful! . . ."

He let her go on talking and weeping; his head thrown back, his hands on the arms of his chair, he listened apparently without emotion. When she was calm again, he asked:

"What are you going to do now?"

"I don't know . . . I shall rest for a few days . . . I am so tired . . . Then I shall go

back to work. I shall try to find a place in a shop or as a mannequin."

His voice was a little stifled as he asked :

"You are still as pretty as ever?"

She did not reply.

"I want to know if you are as pretty as you used to be?"

She remained silent. With a slight shiver, he murmured : "It is dark now, isn't it? Turn on the light. Though I can no longer see, I like to feel that there is light round me . . . Where are you? . . . Near the mantelpiece? . . . Stretch out your hand. You will find the switch there."

No sense even of light could penetrate his eyelids, but from the sudden sound of horror she stifled, he knew that the lamp was on. For the first time she was able to see the result of her work, the terrifying face streaked with white swellings, seamed with red furrows, a narrow black band round the eyes. While he had pleaded for her in court she had crouched on her seat, weeping, not daring to look at him ; now, before this abominable thing, she grew sick with a kind of disgust. But it was without any anger that he murmured :

"I am very different from the man you knew in the old days! I horrify you now, don't I? You shrink from me? . . ."

She tried to keep her voice steady :

"Certainly not, I am here, in the same place . . ."

"Yes, now . . . and I want you to come still nearer. If you knew how the thought of your hands tempts me in my darkness! How I should love to feel their softness once again. But I dare not . . . And yet that is what I wanted to ask you: to let me feel your hand for a minute in mine. We, the blind, can get such marvellous memories from just a touch."

Turning her head away, she held out her arm. Caressing her fingers, he murmured :

"Ah! how good. Don't tremble. Let me try to imagine we are lovers again just as we used to be . . . but you are not wearing my ring. Why? I have not taken yours off. Do you remember? You said 'It is our wedding-ring.' Why have you taken it off?"

"I dare not wear it . . ."

"You must put it on again. You will wear it? Promise me."

She stammered :

"I promise you."

He was silent for a little while, then in a calmer voice :

"It must be quite dark now. How cold I am! If you only knew how cold it feels when one is blind. Your hands are warm; mine are frozen. I have not yet developed the fuller sense of touch.

It takes time, they say . . . At present I am like a little child learning."

She let her fingers remain in his, sighing :

"Oh, my God! My God!"

Speaking like a man in a dream, he went on :

"How glad I am that you came. I wondered whether you would, and I felt I wanted to keep you with me for a long, long time : always . . . But that wouldn't be possible. Life with me would be too sad! You see, little one, when people have memories like ours, they must be careful not to spoil them, and it must be horrible to look at me now, isn't it?"

She tried to protest; what might have been a smile passed over his face.

"Why lie? I remember I once saw a man whose mistress had thrown vitriol over him. His face was not human. Women turned their heads away as they passed, while he, not being able to see and so not knowing, went on talking to the people who were shrinking away from him. I must be, I am like that poor wretch, am I not? Even you who knew me as I used to be, you tremble with disgust; I can feel it. For a long time you will be haunted by the remembrance of my face . . . it will come in between you and everything else . . . How the thought hurts . . . but don't let us go on talking about me . . . You said just now that you were going back to work. Tell me

your plans; come nearer, I don't hear as well as I used to . . . Well?"

Their two armchairs were almost touching. She was silent. He sighed :

"Ah! I can smell your scent. How I have longed for it. I bought a bottle of the perfume you always used, but on me it didn't smell the same. From you it comes mixed with the scent of your skin and hair. Come nearer, let me drink it in . . . You are going away, you will never come back again, let me draw in for the last time as much of you as I can . . . You shiver . . . am I then so horrible?"

She stammered :

"No . . . it is cold . . ."

"Why are you so lightly dressed? I don't believe you brought a cloak. In November, too! It must be damp and dreary in the streets. How you tremble. How warm and comfortable it was in our little home . . . do you remember? You used to lay your face on my shoulder, and I used to hold you close to me. Who would want to sleep in my arms now? Come nearer. Give me your hand . . . There . . . What did you think when your lawyer told you I had asked to see you?"

"I thought I ought to come."

"Do you still love me? . . ."

Her voice was only a breath :

"Yes . . ."

Very slowly, his voice full of supplication, he said :

"I want to kiss you for the last time. I know it will be almost torture for you . . . Afterwards I won't ask anything more. You can go . . . May I? . . . Will you let me? . . ."

Involuntarily she shrank back, then, moved by shame and pity, not daring to refuse a joy to the poor wretch, she laid her head on his shoulder, held up her mouth and shut her eyes. He pressed her gently to him, silent, prolonging the happy moment. She opened her eyes, and seeing the terrible face so near, almost touching her own, for the second time she shivered with disgust, and would have drawn sharply away. But he pressed her closer to him, passionately.

"You would go away so soon? . . . Stay a little longer . . . You haven't seen enough of me . . . Look at me . . . and give me your mouth again . . . more of it than that . . . It is horrible, isn't it?"

She moaned :

"You hurt me . . ."

"Oh, no," he sneered. "I frighten you!"

She struggled.

"You hurt me! You hurt me!"

In a low voice he said :

"Sh! No noise; be quiet. I've got you now and I'll keep you. For how many long days have

I waited for this moment! Keep still, I say, keep still! No nonsehnse! You know I am much stronger than you."

He seized both her hands in one of his, took a little bottle from the pocket of his coat, drew out the stopper with his teeth, and went on in the same quiet voice :

"Yes, it is vitriol; bend your head . . . there : . . You will see; we are going to be incomparable lovers, made for each other . . . Ah, you tremble? Do you understand now why I had you acquitted, and why I made you come here to-day? Your pretty face will be exactly like mine. You will be a monstrous thing, and like me, blind! . . . Ah yes, it hurts, hurts terribly."

She opened her mouth to implore; he ordered :

"No! Not that! Shut your mouth! I don't want to kill you, that would make it too easy for you."

Gripping her in the bend of his arm, he pressed his hand on her mouth and poured the acid slowly over her forehead, her eyes, her cheeks. She struggled desperately, but he held her too firmly and kept on pouring as he talked :

"There . . . a little more . . . you bite, but that's nothing . . . It hurts, doesn't it? It is Hell . . ."

Suddenly he flung her away, crying :

"I am burning myself."

THE LAST KISS

She fell writhing on the floor. Already her face was nothing but a red rag.

Then he straightened himself, stumbled over her, felt about the wall to find the switch, and put out the light. And found them, as in them, was a great Darkness

THE END

